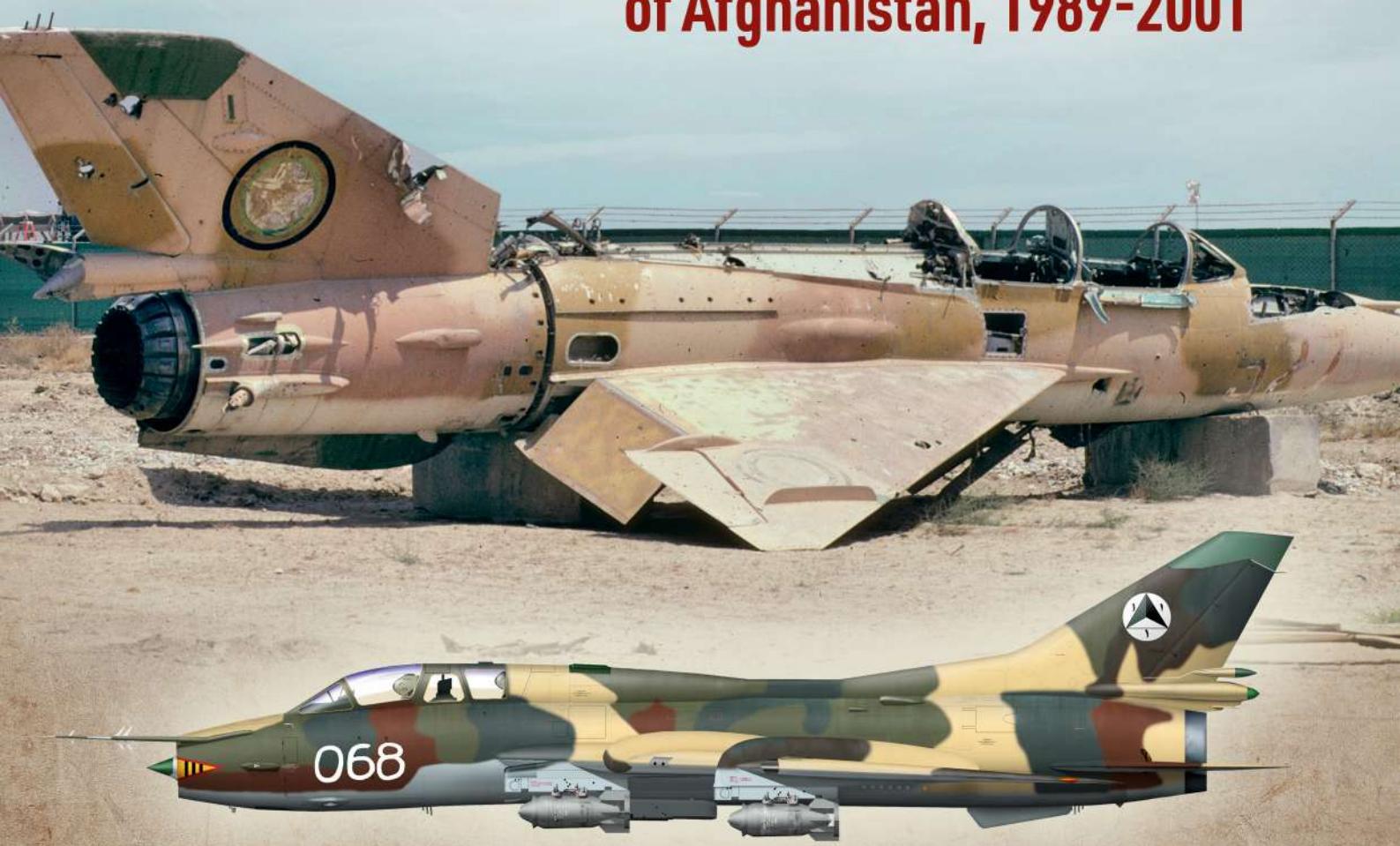


WINGS OVER THE HINDU KUSH

Air Forces, Aircraft and Air Warfare
of Afghanistan, 1989-2001



LUKAS MÜLLER

ASIA @ WAR
SERIES

CONTENTS

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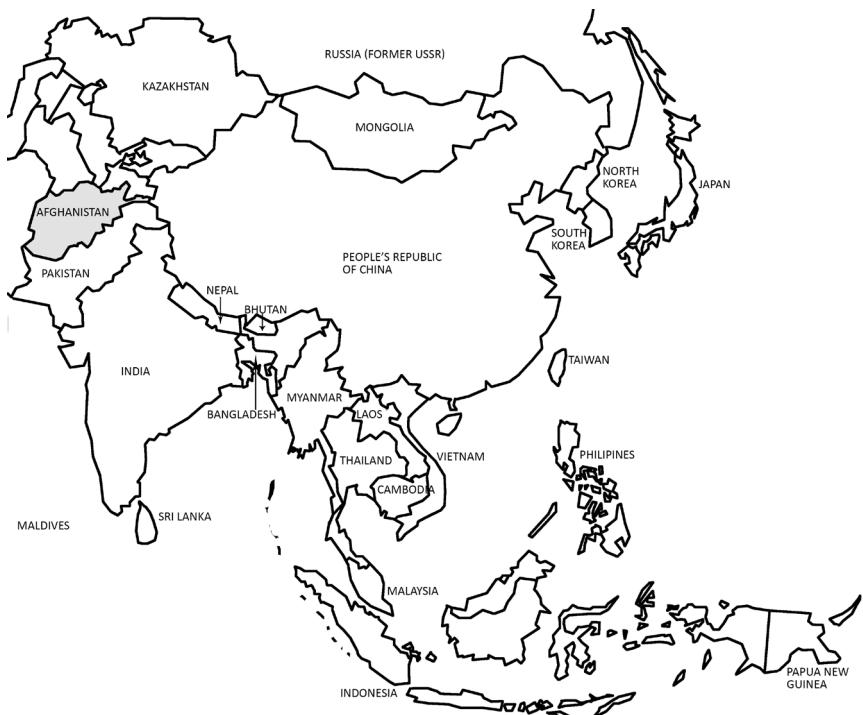
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Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic
designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major
sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAF	Afghan Air Force (a widely-used abbreviation for the Afghan Air Force from 1987 to 1992 and again from 2010)	ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence (Pakistani secret service, intensely engaged in Afghanistan's civil wars from the very beginning and directly influencing all major political and military developments in the country to the present day)
ANAAC	Afghan National Army Air Corps (a branch within the Afghan National Army created after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. In July 2010, ANAAC was transformed into an independent service and renamed the Afghan Air Force)	MANPADS	Man-Portable Air-Defence System (portable, shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missile)
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (official name of Afghanistan from 1978 to 1987)	MoD	Ministry of Defence
DRAAF	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan Air Force (a 'standard' abbreviation for the Afghan Air Force between 1978 and 1987)	OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom (the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001)
IEAAF	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Air Force (the air force of the Afghan Taliban government that ruled the country from 1997 to 2001)	PAF	Pakistan Air Force
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (an Islamist movement that waged an insurgency against the secular government of President Karimov in Uzbekistan)	PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (the Afghan communist party that ruled the country from 1978 to 1992)
IRIAF	Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force	SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force (a NATO-led military mission in Afghanistan, established by the United Nations Security Council in December 2001. The mission ended in December 2014)	SPAAG	Self-Propelled Anti-Aircraft Gun
		USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command (the unified command overseeing the various special operations component commands of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force of the United States Armed Forces)
		USSR	Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union)
		UAADF	Uzbekistan Air and Air Defence Forces
		VVS	Voyenno-Vozdushnye Sily (Rossii) Russian Air Force (since May 1992)

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to tell the fascinating story of various local air forces that were active over Afghanistan in the late 20th century. The book analyses their establishment and performance and describes their actions in the civil war in the period between the withdrawal of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, also 'Soviet Union') from Afghanistan in February 1989 and the fall of the Taliban government in late 2001. Undoubtedly, the existence of the Soviet-supported Democratic Republic of Afghanistan Air Force that took part in fighting against the mujahideen (Islamist fighters) in the 1980s has been well-known to both aviation enthusiasts and scholars around the world. However, next to nothing has ever been published about air forces operated by Afghan warring parties after the fall of the Soviet-supported government in April 1992. Indeed, after the victory of the mujahideen, Afghanistan almost disappeared from the global media coverage. Similarly, the opinion of many policy makers – especially in the West – was that after the communist forces had been defeated, Afghanistan was no longer important. Nothing could have been further from the truth. While the West was busy with crises in the Balkans, Somalia, Iraq and elsewhere, Afghanistan continued being plagued by further rounds of the civil war. Out of the chaos, in 1996 it was the Taliban that emerged as the dominant force, occupying the Afghan capital and, in subsequent years, much of the country. The Taliban's close connections to Islamic radicals and the movement's acceptance of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organisation on

its soil eventually resulted in the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 and the American-led invasion of Afghanistan that started yet another round of the unstoppable Afghan war.

Back in the 1990s, as Afghanistan became fragmented among competing parties and warlords, at least ten different local air forces or small air arms became active, using airframes, manpower and infrastructure inherited from the communist regime air force. Indeed, no other internal conflict with the exception of the Russian civil war of the late 1910s and early 1920s and the Warlord Era in China of the 1920s and 1930s saw so many new air forces emerging within the boundaries of a single country. Although the most common role of various Afghan parties' air forces were transportation duties, several of them saw intense combat action and some pilots even scored air-to-air victories against their fellow Afghan aviators.

I must fully admit that this book is part of a research work in progress: the topic is so complex and certain information so difficult to obtain that this book is by no means a definite account of the history of Afghan military aviation in the given period. It is highly likely that in the future, new information will emerge and that it will be possible to describe this topic in even more detailed fashion.

It is important to note that the conflict in Afghanistan, especially in the 1990s, was extremely complicated with multiple political parties, major warlords and countless local military leaders fighting for power.

I did my best to make the story comprehensible yet I am afraid it still remains complex – which is solely my fault.

I also consider it important to stress that my intention was not to write yet another book detailing the activities of other countries' air forces in Afghanistan: I fully focused on Afghan air forces instead.

There have been a lot of books and articles of various kinds and quality published over the years about the Soviet, United States' and other countries' air operations over Afghan battlefields and a reader interested in this topic can choose from a wide array of sources providing further details to this highly interesting subject.

1

THE GEO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Geography

Afghanistan is a landlocked country situated in the middle of Asia. It is mostly mountainous and the mountains are one of the important factors that shaped the country's history, the nature of the local people, their culture, and undoubtedly also directly influenced the wars that for millennia have hit the territory of present-day Afghanistan so hard.

The country borders the Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the north, shares a short border with China in the east, a very long and barely controllable mountainous border with Pakistan in the east and south, and a long border with Iran in the west. The largest Afghan city is Kabul, which also serves as the country's capital. Other large cities are Mazar-e Sharif and Kunduz in the north, Jalalabad in the east, Kandahar in the south, and Herat in the west. At the time of writing of this book, Afghanistan is divided into 34 provinces.

Vast central areas of the country are formed by extensions of the Hindu Kush mountain range that itself stretches through eastern and north-eastern Afghanistan, making these areas extremely mountainous with the highest peaks reaching over 7,000 meters. Life in the Hindu Kush has always been centred in the valleys with rivers or streams and scarce patches of fertile land, while the high grounds remained uninhabited. For all of the invading armies in the country's history, control of the valleys and mountain passes was essential and difficult at the same time. Caravans of people and animals in ancient times, and convoys of vehicles in the late 20th century, were an easy target for bands of local fighters who would ambush invaders wherever possible, making control of the mountains extremely complicated or outright impossible. Arguably the most famous Afghan valley of our times has been the Panjshir where the mujahideen commander Ahmad Shah Massoud defeated the Soviet army multiple times and later managed



The main physical features and main urban centres of Afghanistan. (Map by Tom Cooper)

to defend the strategically important valley against repeated Taliban offensives. The Panjshir was not the only valley whose inhabitants did not succumb under the pressure of invaders though: for example, mujahideen in Darya Suf in the northern province of Samangan drove out the Soviets twice and repulsed numerous Taliban attacks, being surrounded by the radical movement's armies from all sides for years.

The mountainous nature of most of Afghanistan prevented construction of reasonable land routes in many parts of the country: in the 1980s and 1990s there were only a few asphalted roads in the Hindu Kush massive while the rest of the land communications were left unpaved and often impassable due to landslides, snow, or damage caused by relentless fighting. Undoubtedly the most important mountain highway has been the one connecting the capital of Kabul with the flatlands in the north, leading through the Salang Pass and the famous Salang Tunnel up to the Uzbek border.

Many settlements in the mountains have always been isolated and accessible only with difficulty, especially in winters that are harsh, cold and snowy. Winter snows also prevent movement on most normally motorable roads, making any larger transfers of troops and supplies very difficult, effectively stopping any large-scale military operations, while summers have been called the 'fighting season'. Given the situation, it is only logical that in the second half of the 20th century, and especially from the outbreak of the civil war that only worsened the conditions on the ground, aircraft and helicopters have been the preferred method of transport for all those who could afford it, be it the warring parties' commanders or the small number of rich civilians.

Not all of Afghanistan is mountainous though: in the north the foothills of the Hindu Kush slowly descend into the vast dusty plains of Central Asia; and in the west and southwest, large areas are made up of deserts with very little population. Flat, or at least not so rugged, terrain enabled the construction of reasonably good highways linking Kabul, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e Sharif. From Mazar, this highway heads back in a south-eastern direction into the high Hindu Kush massive and through the Salang Tunnel back to Kabul. During the civil war of the 1990s, the highly mobile Taliban units often made use of this string of highways that encircle a large part of Afghan territory, transferring their men and hardware quickly and causing immense problems to their unprepared enemies.

History

Many different kingdoms and empires have risen and fallen on the territory of the present-day Afghanistan and it has always been on a crossroad of different civilizations, religions and cultures: notably Persian, Hellenic and Islamic in the west and Indian, Mongol and others in the east. One of the well-known statesmen who led his armies through the harsh lands of the Hindu Kush mountain range was Alexander the Great of Macedonia, who brought with him a Hellenic influence that lasted several centuries. In the 7th century AD, much of the area of nowadays Afghanistan – that at that time was known as Khorasan – was conquered by Arab invaders; as a consequence, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions practised by the local population were gradually replaced by Islam. Mongol invasion in the 13th century brought large-scale destruction and suffering while Turco-Mongol warlord Timur, who is known for his interest in art and architecture, made the Afghan city of Herat one of the capitals of his vast empire. In 1526 Timur's descendant Babur invaded the Delhi Sultanate and established a famous Mughal Empire stretching over much of present-day India. From the 16th to 17th century, Afghanistan was divided into three parts: the Mughals controlled the east including the city of Kabul; Persian Shi'a rulers controlled the west; while the north was ruled by the Central Asian

Khanate of Bukhara.

The modern Afghan state was founded only in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani who unified Afghan tribes and established the Afghan Empire stretching from parts of Iran through a large portion of modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan to Delhi in India. His son, Timur Shah, transferred the royal capital from the southern city of Kandahar to Kabul in 1796.

The early 19th century was a turbulent period in Afghan history: the fragmented empire had many temporary rulers and faced threats from the Persians in the west, Uzbeks in the north and Sikh Empire in the east. In 1838, the British invaded Afghanistan – that meanwhile had become an Emirate – starting the infamous First Anglo-Afghan War. After some initial success, the British were expelled from Kabul in 1842 after a disastrous retreat in which their forces and accompanying civilians were almost completely annihilated by Afghan tribesmen. As the British and Russian empires were competing for influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia in a series of confrontations known as The Great Game, the Second Anglo-Afghan War erupted in 1878. After two campaigns, the British proved victorious and selected a new Afghan Emir Abdul Rahman Khan who had to accept their conditions. Afghanistan became a British protectorate, serving as a large buffer state between the Russian Empire in Central Asia and British territories in South Asia. While the Emir had a free hand regarding internal Afghan issues, the country's foreign policy had to align with that of the British.

After a series of brutal military expeditions, Emir Abdul Rahman Khan managed to turn Afghanistan into a more centralised state in which Pashtuns clearly had the upper hand, while Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Tajiks and other ethnic groups were placed in an inferior role. Large groups of certain problematic Pashtun tribes that rebelled against the 'Iron Emir' were sent to northern areas of Afghanistan where they acted as colonisers, helping to pacify non-Pashtun territories, although some Pashtuns had been living in the north already since the 18th century. In more recent times, it was descendants of these Pashtun settlers who supported the Taliban in otherwise anti-Taliban territories of the Afghan north.

Pacifying rebellious areas inside the country, Emir Abdul Rahman Kahn also signed the well-known Durand Line Treaty demarcating border between Afghanistan and those parts of British India that in 1947 became Pakistan. The Durand Line that effectively split the Pashtun lands between the two countries proved to be one of the causes of problematic and tense mutual relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan for the whole period of these countries' existence.

Afghanistan's full independence was recognised by the British only after the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919 in which Afghanistan experienced its first-ever aerial attack when a Handley Page V/1500 dropped 20 bombs on Kabul, hitting the Emir's Palace and sending the ladies of the royal harem into the streets in terror, reportedly causing great scandal.¹ After the war, Emir Amanullah Khan introduced a number of reforms, intending to turn Afghanistan into a modern state. Amanullah Khan, who in 1926 changed his title to king, even went on a long journey to Europe, visiting a number of countries including Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom. During his travels, opposition at home triggered a civil war in the course of which the King abdicated. After a short chaotic period characterised by violence, it was Mohammad Zahir Shah who in 1933 became the new Afghan king. In the 1950s and 1960s, Zahir Shah maintained friendly diplomatic relations with both sides of the Cold War and kept the country stable and peaceful. In July 1973, while abroad, he was overthrown in a bloodless coup d'état by the then-army commander Lieutenant General Mohammad Daoud Khan who abolished the

monarchy and proclaimed Afghanistan a republic. On the internal political scene, a growing conflict between the modernists represented primarily by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan and traditionalists represented by the clergy, landlords and Islamist parties slowly dragged the country into instability.

In April 1978, a coup by the Afghan Army under the influence of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (the Afghan communist party that ruled the country from 1978 to 1992, PDPA) took place in Kabul and Daoud Khan was killed. After the coup, which became known as the Saur (April) Revolution, the country was renamed as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and Nur Mohammad Taraki became its leader. The PDPA initiated radical reforms, such as equal rights for women and the redistribution of land to peasants, which alienated much of the traditionally-thinking population – especially in the countryside – and sparked armed revolts of anti-communist mujahideen throughout nearly all Afghan provinces. It was precisely these events that marked the beginning of the Afghan civil war that has been raging to this day practically without interruption.

Almost from the very time of its establishment, the PDPA suffered from conflict between two factions: Khalq (People) and Parcham (Banner). There was even a rift in the Khalq faction itself that eventually resulted in the killing of Mohammad Taraki and established his rival, Hafizullah Amin, as the leader of the country in September 1979. As the power of the state was crumbling in the face of armed resistance and the chances were that Afghanistan would be turned into an anti-Soviet country, the Soviet Union deployed its 40th Army to invade Afghanistan in the last days of December 1979. Soviet special forces killed Amin in a swift operation after which a new government led by Babrak Karmal of the PDPA's Parcham faction was installed. Although the Soviets initially did not plan that the 40th Army would take part in offensive operations against the mujahideen, after a few months it was clear that without direct Soviet military action, the pro-Soviet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan would not survive. The Afghan government's military – including the air force – suffered from low combat readiness and low morale; many Afghan army conscripts actually did not know why they fought for the communist revolution that only brought about problems and suffering. Defections of army conscripts to the mujahideen side were commonplace and the Soviet units eventually had to be involved in every large anti-mujahideen operation. President Karmal's pro-Soviet government became absolutely dependent on financial, material, military, and humanitarian support from the USSR that started pouring into the country by land and by air on a daily basis.

In the US the Afghan civil war was seen through the discourse of the struggle between the Western world and communism. Americans and some of their allies started supporting the anti-communist mujahideen with money, weapons, non-lethal equipment and humanitarian deliveries. Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt and others – but also various Muslim non-state actors – supported the mujahideen as well. Through the 1980s, between 10,000 and 35,000 volunteers from Muslim countries came to fight in Afghanistan against the communist regime and Soviet invaders; in the West, the most famous of these volunteers was Usama bin Laden.² The Pakistani ISI channelled US support primarily to fundamentalist Hezb-e Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who, they hoped, would create a pro-Pakistani Afghan regime in the future. Saudi Arabia supported all of the major Sunni parties but the largest chunk of its money went to Ittihad-e Islami, a fundamentalist organisation led by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf who himself was a Wahhabi. To counter US, Saudi, and Pakistani actions, Iran involved itself in supporting several Afghan Shi'a groups that in 1989 unified themselves in the most influential

Shi'a party, called Hezb-e Wahdat, that was to play an important role in the power struggle of the 1990s.

After a few years of unexpectedly heavy fighting and after sustaining approximately 15,000 dead, the Soviets started planning their withdrawal from Afghanistan which began in 1988 and ended in February 1989. In September 1987, Afghan president Karmal was replaced by Mohammad Najibullah, a member of the PDPA's Parcham faction who previously served as a head of the KHAD, the Afghan equivalent of the Soviet KGB secret service. As a pure military solution of the conflict seemed less and less likely, the Afghan government started pursuing a national reconciliation policy that under Najibullah got into full swing, although the ultimate objective of this policy – ending the war and creating a multi-party government – was never achieved.

President Najibullah managed to stay in power until April 1992 when the Afghan state apparatus and the military disintegrated due to the pressure from the mujahideen, the revolt of pro-regime militias in northern provinces, and the cessation of aid from the USSR. In the next few years, the parties to the Afghan civil war – each of which had one or more foreign backers who were directly responsible for continuation of the war – tried to create a unified government, fought each other, formed alliances and broke them, engaged in peace talks and quarrelled again. Afghanistan became practically divided into a number of fiefdoms ruled by party leaders or warlords of many kinds. It was only the Taliban who managed to unify most of the areas under their rule, yet even this radical movement never conquered the whole country, facing opposition mainly from the famous commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, and from other military leaders who were not willing to give up under Taliban pressure.

Many politicians and other persons in Afghanistan and abroad, initially considered the Taliban to be a possible solution for the war-ravaged country. Indeed, in the first few years following its formation, the radical movement could have been seen as just another faction of the nearly forgotten Afghan civil war – yet stronger and more capable of unifying the country and bringing peace. By the late 1990s, however, the Taliban leadership who previously had had no ambitions to become a part of a global jihad developed a very close relationship with Usama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organisation that had found in Afghanistan a sanctuary it so badly needed after being expelled from Sudan in 1996. When US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were targeted by suicide bombers in August 1998, the US retaliated with Tomahawk cruise missile strikes against jihadist training camps in Afghanistan. Terrorist attacks that had been supported by bin Laden contributed to the isolation of the Taliban movement on the international scene and shattered any possibility of cooperation between the Taliban and the Americans. The crisis culminated after the murderous act of terrorism on 11 September 2001 after which the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan and in cooperation with local anti-Taliban parties quickly defeated the movement's conventional forces, ending the Taliban rule over the country.

This brief and undoubtedly superficial excursion into Afghan history cannot be concluded without mentioning some of the defining factors that have shaped the country's military and political developments. For the whole of history, Afghan territory has been very difficult to conquer and govern – a bitter truth that took years for the Soviet Union and in more recent times for the US and its allies to realise. The same principle has been valid for Afghan internal politics: despite attempts and some claimed successes in the creation of a centralised state, Afghanistan has always been characterised by relatively weak central governments and relatively strong regions that have been hard to subdue by force. This situation stems from a

multitude of factors such as harsh, mountainous terrain that makes many regions inaccessible and difficult to conquer, the independent character of the local people and leaders that do not like the centre meddling in their affairs. In addition, the Afghan nation consists of several ethnic groups with different traditions and languages, although the entire population is bound by Islam. The late 1970s' anti-communist uprising, its continuation in the 1980s in the form of the anti-communist jihad, and the eventual fragmentation of Afghanistan into many de-facto independent territories after the total collapse of the central government in the 1990s are yet another manifestation of the same, centuries-old principle.

Ethnic Groups

The Afghan population consists of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Baluch, Pashai, and several other groups. Although in certain periods of history and certain places, these groups managed to co-exist in peace, their history has also been marked by violence and inequality that lasts up to the present day.

The largest of all Afghan nationalities are the Pashtuns who live mainly in the southern and eastern provinces and whose territory was artificially divided between Afghanistan and British India when Emir Abdul Rahman Khan signed the Durand Line treaty in 1893. Comprising around 40 percent of the Afghan population, Pashtuns have been the traditional rulers of Afghanistan since the creation of the Durrani Empire in 1747 and any attempt by other ethnic groups

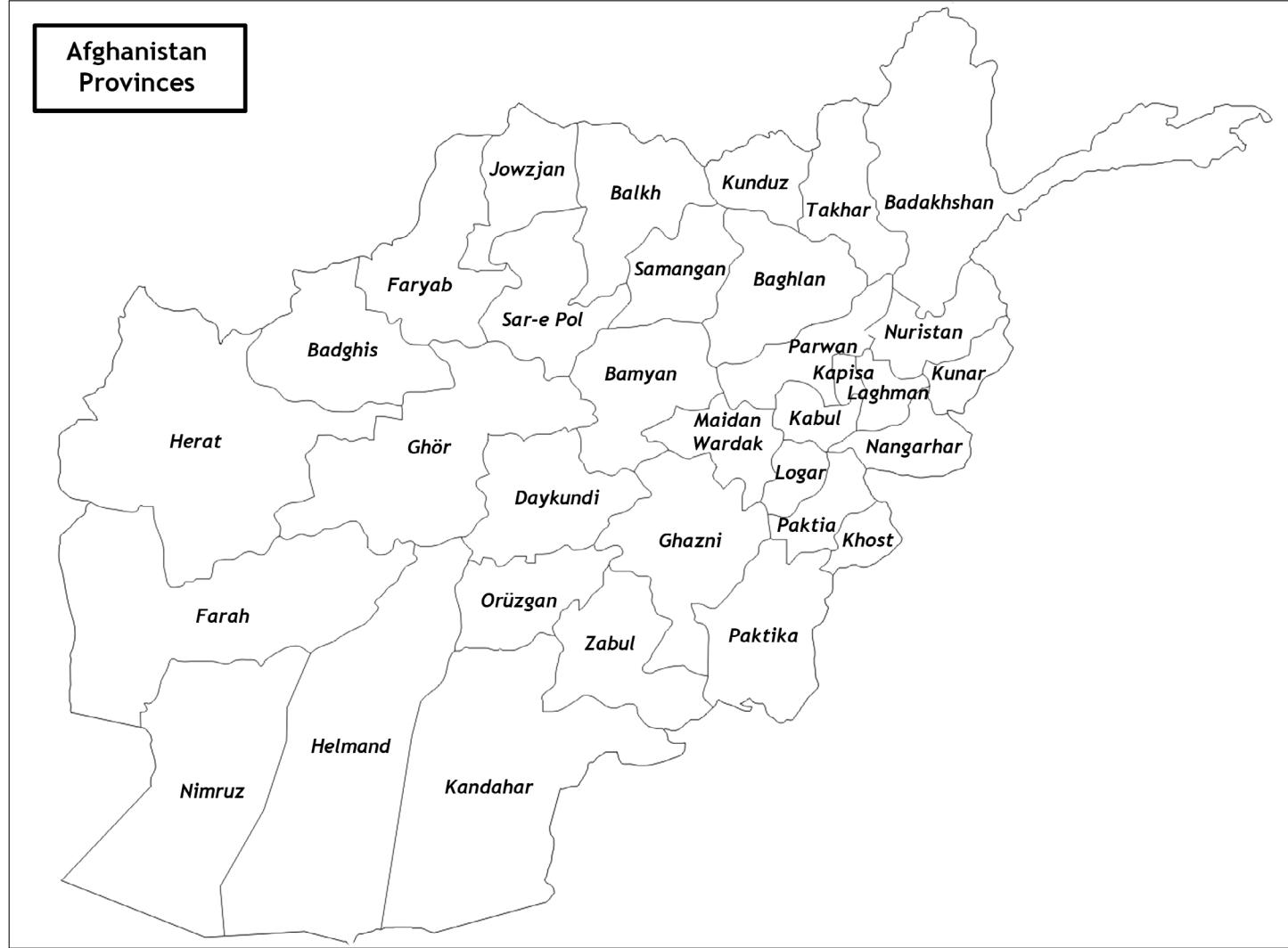
to play a decisive role in state affairs was met with resentment from the Pashtuns.

The second largest group living in Afghanistan are the Tajiks, a Persian-speaking people who live primarily in north-eastern and northern areas including Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif, and also around the western city of Herat and other areas. Tajiks are also the main ethnic group in the country of Tajikistan that borders Afghanistan in the north-east. In the context of recent Afghan politics and control over the military forces, Tajiks have been challengers to the Pashtuns.

The third largest Afghan ethnic group are the Hazaras, mainly Persian-speaking descendants of Mongol invaders who for centuries have been living in central Afghan provinces in a region that has been known as Hazarajat or Hazaristan. Significant numbers of Hazara also live in Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e Sharif. Unlike other Afghan ethnic groups who are adherents of Sunni Islam, the majority of Hazara are Shi'a.

The fourth major ethnic group in Afghanistan are the Uzbeks who inhabit the plains of northern Afghanistan. Uzbeks came to the territory with waves of Turkic invaders from Central Asia and intermingled with local Iranian tribes. Hazaras and Uzbeks have often been marginalised and oppressed by the ruling Pashtuns and – paradoxically – it was only the civil war in the late 20th century that brought Uzbeks and Hazaras power and influence in the state matters that they had never enjoyed in the past.

While the anti-communist jihad of the 1980s saw Pashtun mujahideen parties fight against Pashtun-dominated communist



A map of Afghan provinces as of the 1980s and 1990s. (Map by Tom Cooper)

government, the last months of the communist regime and subsequent rounds of the civil war saw ethnicity as one of the important factors in building alliances. Eventually, when the Pashtun Taliban emerged as the dominant force in the Afghan conflict, the only oppositional groups willing to fight on despite many setbacks in the field were almost exclusively non-Pashtun.

Important Players of the Afghan Civil War

During the civil war of the 1980s and 1990s, dozens of political parties, movements, major tribal leaders and warlords, as well as hundreds of less significant local groupings fought for power. Their ideologies and goals varied widely, from establishing a clerical Islamic regime to restoration of the monarchy to the creation of a Maoist state.

The most influential groups that are important from this book's perspective were as follows:

- The Afghan communist regime: The Soviet-supported Afghan government practically consisted of followers of one political organisation – the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Although the PDPA was later renamed as Hezb-e Watan (Homeland Party) and dropped the communist ideology, its powerbase remained the same and it continued to be seen as communist by its mujahideen enemies. Afghan government military forces, including the air force, were controlled by PDPA/Hezb-e Watan up to its defeat in April 1992.
- Jamiat-e Islami (JEI, Islamic Society): This primarily Tajik party, albeit with a large Pashtun following, especially before the emergence of the Taliban, was established in the early 1970s and led by professor Burhanuddin Rabbani. In the 1980s, Jamiat-e Islami emerged as one of the most influential jihadi organisations. One of the most prominent members of this party was Ahmad Shah Massoud, a famous commander who created his own military-administrative organisation known as Shura-e Nazar (Council of the North) that became a pillar of Jamiat military might in the north-east of the country. Although technically dissolved in 1992, Shura-e Nazar structures remained active and played a crucial role in the anti-Taliban coalition, resisting the radical movement's forces up to the fall of the Taliban government in late 2001. Other influential leaders were Ismail Khan, who became a Jamiat Emir (commander) of the western regions around Herat, Mulla Naqibullah Akhund based around Kandahar, and Atta Mohammad Nur in northern areas around Mazar-e Sharif.
- Junbish-e Milli Islami (JMI, National Islamic Movement): A political-military organisation founded by Uzbek commander Abdul Rashid Dostum only after the fall of the Najibullah government in 1992. Junbish initially comprised all nationalities living in the north, including Pashtuns, Hazaras, and Tajiks, but over time it transformed to an Uzbek-dominated force. Although defeated as a coherent fighting force by the Taliban in 1998, some Junbish commanders managed to fight the radical movement in remote areas of Afghanistan up to the fall of the Taliban government in 2001.
- Hezb-e Islami (HI, Islamic Party): One of the most prominent jihadi organisations of the 1980s, it received the bulk of the US support intended for the mujahideen. Its leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, was known as a hardliner who not only refused to negotiate with Najibullah but also fought against the Rabbani government created after Najibullah's fall. For years, this predominantly Pashtun party was supported by Pakistan but failed to achieve any strategic victory on the ground, and

in military terms it was relatively weak. In 1994, Pakistan abandoned Hekmatyar and shifted its resources to the Taliban which defeated or lured to their side virtually all important Hezb-e Islami commanders and sent the party to insignificance.

- Hezb-e Wahdat (HEW, Unity Party): The most influential Shi'a organisation in Afghanistan formed in 1989 and supported by Iran through the 1990s, it advocated Hazara interests. From the beginning of its existence, it controlled vast areas of central Afghanistan and from the fall of Najibullah in 1992 to a military debacle in 1995, it also controlled large portions of west Kabul. The party suffered another serious blow when the Taliban captured Hazara heartlands, including the town of Bamiyan, in 1998 but Wahdat militias continued guerrilla operations up until the defeat of the Taliban in autumn 2001.
- Taliban: An Islamic fundamentalist movement born in the southern province of Kandahar in late 1994 apparently with the direct assistance of certain elements of the Pakistani administration. The movement clearly distanced itself from mujahideen parties and ex-communist militias fighting for power in the post-Najibullah Afghanistan and promised it would disarm all commanders and return peace to the country. However, as time went by and the Taliban suffered several serious military setbacks, it became as equally brutal as any other party in the civil war. With support of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, in 1996 the Pashtun-dominated movement conquered Kabul, forcing the internationally recognised government of President Rabbani of Jamiat to flee. In 1997, the Taliban renamed the country as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and with more military victories, became the de-facto rulers of most of the country. The Emirate's existence was finished abruptly in the autumn 2001 when the movement was militarily defeated by the US-led allied forces combined with domestic anti-Taliban opposition.

A Short History of the Afghan Air Force up to 1989

According to the available reports, the first aircraft arrived in the country from Soviet Russia in 1921 and the Afghan Air Force was officially established three years later. In the subsequent years, Afghanistan acquired vast array of aircraft, for example Junkers F.13s and G.24s from Germany, Polikarpov R-1s from Soviet Russia or Bristol Fighters from the United Kingdom.³ Although some Afghan pilots and mechanics were trained, the service was practically dependent on Soviet and other foreign crews. As the result of a short civil war in 1928-1929, virtually all aircraft became grounded, although several R-1s and one F.13 survived in their hangars and were used well into the 1930s.

In an effort to modernise the force, in the late 1930s Afghanistan bought a batch of Hawker Hind biplanes from the United Kingdom and reconnaissance and training aircraft from Italy. The Afghans were so satisfied with the Hinds that they later acquired additional batches and the type formed the backbone of the service. Together with newly acquired Avro Ansons and D.H. Tiger Moths, Hinds continued their careers with the Royal Afghan Air Force up to the 1950s when Afghanistan entered the jet age, acquiring MiG-17 fighter jets and Il-28 jet bombers from the USSR.

In the 1950s, Bagram air base was constructed by the Soviets, followed by the US-built Kandahar airport, and Soviet-built Shindand air base in the 1960s. The Soviet Union became Afghanistan's biggest arms supplier and from the 1960s up to the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, almost all equipment of both the air force and the army originated in the USSR.



Rows of MiG-17s and Il-28s of the Royal Afghan Air force as seen at Kabul IAP in December 1959. Notable are Royal Afghan Air Force roundels applied on their rear fuselages. (see colour section for details). (Library of Congress)

After the overthrow of Zahir Shah in 1973, the Afghan military developed even closer ties with the USSR and acquired additional MiG-21 fighter jets, Su-7 fighter-bombers, Mi-8 helicopters and An-26 transport planes. In the late 1970s, Afghanistan got its first dedicated combat helicopters: Mi-24As and Mi-25s (the export variant of Mi-24D). Yak-11 piston aircraft were used for basic training. Cadets that aimed to become jet pilots continued their training on MiG-15UTIs and newly acquired Czechoslovak-made L-39C Albatros trainers – the only Afghan aircraft type of those times whose country of origin was not the Soviet Union.

After the Soviet invasion in December 1979, the DRAAF experienced purges of officers not considered loyal and operated in close connection with the Soviet air force units present in the country. During the 1980s, thanks to deliveries of new aircraft from the USSR,

the AAF considerably grew in size and thousands of new pilots were trained. The USSR provided Afghanistan with Mikoyan i Gurevich MiG-21FLs, MiG-21PFMs, and MiG-21bis; Sukhoi Su-17 fighter-bombers and its export variants like the Su-22UM-2/UM3, and Su-22M-3/4; Mil Mi-24V helicopter gunships and their export variants Mi-25s and Mi-35s; additional Mi-8T and Mi-8MT assault helicopters, and their export variant Mi-17; as well as Antonov An-12, An-26 and An-32 transports. The primary task of the air force was ground attack missions flown against the mujahideen all over the country. Although a number of pilots defected with their aircraft to Pakistan and requested political asylum, the air force remained one of the most loyal elements of the communist regime, especially in comparison with other components of the often disloyal and unreliable Afghan military forces.

2

THE NAJIBULLAH GOVERNMENT VERSUS THE MUJAHIDEEN, 1989-1992

The period between the Soviet withdrawal and the mujahideen takeover was characterised by a gradual decline of Afghan government power and a relative decrease in both sides' military operations. In the mujahideen camp, many leaders and rank-and-file fighters openly started questioning the need for the jihad in a situation when the Soviet enemy had been pushed out of the country. Indeed, in some areas the mujahideen learned to co-exist with the government and reduced

their military activities, choosing to trade with government-held cities instead of shelling them with artillery, although in other parts of the country, especially those that were close to the Pakistani border, the mujahideen launched several large-scale offensives unprecedented by any of their previous actions. The government military was mostly confined around larger urban centres and important highways while the mujahideen and pro-government irregular militia formations

controlled the countryside.

As had been pre-planned in Moscow, the Afghan government of President Najibullah pursued a policy of national reconciliation aimed at softening tensions between the state and the armed opposition. Not only was the country's official name changed in 1987 from the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (a name introduced by the communists after the Saur revolution in 1978) to a 'more neutral' Republic of Afghanistan but also the name of the ruling party changed in 1990 from the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to the Homeland Party (Hezb-e Watan) and the party officially dropped communist ideology, allowing only practising Muslims into its ranks.¹ However, the organisation practically remained the same and the state structures, including the army and air force, continued to be divided into Khalq and Parcham factions which were unable to overcome their differences.

Lack of unity also plagued the mujahideen front. Indeed, the main problem with the mujahideen parties was their hopeless fragmentation: not only were there seven 'officially recognised' parties based in the Pakistani city of Peshawar, incapable of agreeing on almost anything, but there also were numerous – often mutually hostile – military commanders active inside Afghanistan who actually did the fighting. When the Soviets were pulling out of Afghanistan, and even after their withdrawal, there were several initiatives aimed at creating a broad-based government but each of them failed, largely because Pakistan did not want to allow the formation of any independent and potentially unfriendly regime in Afghanistan. Instead, Pakistan fully supported Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami party which repeatedly torpedoed any attempt to solve the conflict peacefully.

Despite withdrawal of its military units in February 1989, the Soviet Union firmly stood behind Najibullah and proceeded with deliveries of not only food and fuel, but also weapons of all kinds. The Najibullah government was absolutely dependent on this assistance and it was able to remain in power for as long as the Soviet Union provided



An Afghan guerrilla with a captured Strela-1M/SA-7 MANPADS. (US DoD/National Archives)



The Soviets transferred dozens of aircraft directly from their own units to Afghanistan in 1989-1990. This is the lower surface of a Su-17's wing, showing both Soviet and Afghan insignia applied next to each other. (Photo by Santiago Flores)

support. Dissolution of the USSR in late 1991, and cessation of this support from January 1992, led to immense problems within the Afghan government and its disintegration in a matter of a few months. However, back in 1988, as the USSR began its armed forces' pull-out from the country, survival of a pro-Soviet Afghan regime was among Moscow decision makers' priorities. Although the Soviets were not willing to commit their military forces directly in combat anymore, they assured Najibullah that they would provide everything the Afghan government needed for continuation of its anti-mujahideen struggle. Thus, training of Afghan personnel – including pilots – in the USSR



During the mid-1980s, the Soviets frequently donated sizeable batches of replacement aircraft to Afghanistan. This row of MiG-21FLs and MiG-21UMs includes at least two examples that survived long enough to see operational service during the 1990s, including MiG-21UM serial number 0549 (foreground) and the MiG-21FL serial number 77 (last aircraft in the row). (Tom Cooper Collection)

military schools continued without interruption and Soviet advisers continued to be embedded in units operating sophisticated weapons. The USSR also continued delivering new military hardware, including aircraft and helicopters: for example, in 1989–1990, 49 helicopters and 125 aircraft were reportedly delivered, although an Afghan request for modern MiG-29 fighter jets was turned down.²

The essential element in sustaining the Najibullah regime were convoys of trucks that were loaded with all kinds of supplies in the northern border town of Hairatan and proceeded south, particularly to Kabul, although Ahmad Shah Massoud's forces regularly got their portion of material from these convoys as a kind of payment for letting them through. Additionally, a significant volume of supplies was airlifted by Soviet transport aircraft delivering everything that was needed for the regime's survival directly to the capital in the biggest air supply effort in Soviet history: the number of daily flights from the USSR to Afghanistan reached between 10 and 40, depending on the situation. The value of aid delivered between 1989 and 1991 reached billions of US Dollars; for example, in 1990, the USSR reportedly delivered military and humanitarian aid worth \$300 million US per month.³ For example, just the value of Scud missiles delivered in the late 1980s and early 1990s was well over one billion dollars. On the contrary, in the period of 1987–1989 the US supported the mujahideen with aid worth of just over \$600 million US annually and in subsequent years, as it became evident that supporting hard-line Islamic parties would have no positive consequences, American assistance dropped significantly. Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries provided additional hundreds of millions of US dollars every year but even American and Arab support combined never exceeded the support provided by the USSR to the communist regime.

However, as the Soviet Union headed towards its dissolution in 1991, the attitude of Soviet politicians to the Afghan war and the Najibullah government drastically changed and the continuation of the pro-Soviet Afghan regime was no longer considered important. The result was an agreement between the USSR and the US that both superpowers would cease all military aid to all Afghan parties by 1 January 1992.

Najibullah Government Air Force

In 1988, as the Soviets were in the middle of their pull-out from Afghanistan, the AAF reportedly consisted of the following units:⁴

- 322nd Regiment with MiG-21s of different versions stationed at Bagram AB
- 335th Regiment with Su-7s and Il-28s stationed at Shindand AB
- 355th Regiment with Su-17s and Su-22s of different versions stationed at Bagram AB
- 373rd Regiment with An-26 and An-32 transports stationed at Kabul International Airport

- 375th Regiment with Mi-24V/Mi-25/Mi-35s, and Mi-8T/MT/MTV and Mi-17s, stationed at Mazar-e Sharif AB
- 377th Regiment with Mi-24V/Mi-25/Mi-35s, Mi-8T/MT/MTV and Mi-17s, stationed at Kabul International Airport
- 382nd regiment with An-12s stationed at Kabul International Airport
- 393rd Regiment with L-39s stationed at Mazar-e Sharif AB

Although each air force unit had its HQ at a specific base, their aircraft were distributed among different airports according to actual needs: helicopters and transport aircraft often operated from airstrips or – in the case of helicopters – paved or unpaved landing zones in remote towns and cities. In 1991, two squadrons of MiG-21 and Su-22 from Bagram were transferred to Mazar-e Sharif for operations in the north and some MiG-21s found their way to Kandahar airport.

In air-to-ground operations, the AAF primarily employed UB-16 and UB-32 rocket pods and FAB bombs of various types, along with cluster bomb units (CBUs) from the RBK-series, and KMGU munitions dispensers.⁵ The AAF also received an unknown number of Kh-23 Grom (AS-7 Kerry) tactical air-to-ground missiles, although their actual combat deployment remains a mystery. For air combat, the USSR delivered a small number of K-13 (AA-2 Atoll) and R-60 (AA-8 Aphid) guided missiles that, however, were never fired in anger until the 1990s intra-Afghan air combats.

Afghan air defence consisted of SA-2 and SA-3 SAM systems primarily deployed around Kabul, SA-7 MANPADS, ZSU-23-4 SPAAGs and number of other anti-aircraft guns of different types such as KS-19, S-60, ZPU-1, ZPU-4 and ZU-23-2, although these were primarily used in ground combat as effective anti-personnel and anti-vehicle weapons. Air defence forces were also equipped with different types of radars that were deployed at major airfields around the country.

By the end of the 1980s, obsolete aircraft like MiG-17s, Mi-4s and An-2s were practically grounded and combat tasks were performed by more modern types. A small number of old Il-28s and Su-7s continued combat operations from Shindand AB even after the Soviet pull-out, although in subsequent months they were all grounded and replaced with Su-17s and Su-22s.⁶ Contrary to many reports that continue to appear in aviation books and articles, the Afghan air force never operated any MiG-19s, MiG-21Fs, MiG-23s or Su-25s. Although the last two types saw extensive combat deployment over Afghan territory, they belonged solely to the Soviet air force units stationed in the country and none of them were transferred to the Afghans.

In the anti-mujahideen struggle, the AAF played a very important role, especially after the Soviets pulled their air force units out of the country. AAF transport aircraft and helicopters flew resupply missions to remote, encircled garrisons and moved army units around the country while fighter jets and combat helicopters supported



Home-based at Bagram AB, 322nd Regiment operated multiple variants of the MiG-21. Gauging by its camouflage pattern (see colour section for details), this MiG-21bis belonged to one of the batches delivered in the late 1980s. Notable is the chaff and flare dispenser installed low on the centre fuselage, below the wing. (Tom Long collection, via Tom Cooper)

ground units, although coordinated CAS missions were reportedly rare due to lack of effective communication between the army and the air force. In most cases, air support was pre-planned and not available at short notice to the commanders.⁷ Mi-24s and Mi-8/17s were also used for protection of vulnerable convoys. Apart from sorties flown in support of ground operations, fighter jets were sent to bomb mujahideen targets in the rear, such as cave complexes and training camps, and also villages and cities. Indeed, the air force repeatedly carried out indiscriminate attacks on non-military targets, performing collective punishment against civilians living in areas controlled by the mujahideen. Absolute disregard for civilian lives was especially apparent when the AAF attacked mujahideen targets located in built-up areas: collateral damage was typically huge, sometimes even greater than damage inflicted to the intended target. In many cases, a city or a village as such was a target. Still, in defiance of this practice, some pilots were not particularly eager to target civilians or even the mujahideen that came from the same tribes or same areas as the airmen, and in some cases AAF crews intentionally missed their targets, dropping bombs over uninhabited areas.

Precise numbers of aircraft delivered to the Afghan air force throughout the 1980s remain unknown but they surely reached hundreds: estimates range from 350 to 400 aircraft of all types as being active in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Apart from newly-built aircraft intended for export, a high number of machines that the Soviets transferred to the AAF came as second-hand examples directly from Soviet units: many Su-17M2s and M3s, and also MiG-21s, helicopters and transport aircraft arrived in Afghanistan in this way.

When the Soviets were pulling out their army from Afghanistan, their efforts to boost the AAF's capabilities intensified and the force's strength reached its historical peak. As a result, the intensity of Afghan air force operations in the late 1980s and early 1990s reached an unprecedented rate: by 1989, the air force was able to carry out 200-250 flights per day, with peaks of 300-400. When needed, some jet pilots flew more than five combat missions per day.⁸ Naturally, maintaining such a frenetic pace of combat operations required extensive deliveries of fuel and ammunition, both of which poured into Afghanistan from the USSR in huge amounts on a daily basis.

Unsurprisingly, the number of losses suffered by the air force reached hundreds: General Mohammad Nabi Azimi, a former Deputy Defence Minister under the Najibullah government, claims that from the Saur revolution in 1978 to the fall of Najibullah in April 1992, the air force lost 617 aircraft and 651 crew members. While some of them fell victim to the Stinger missiles widely reported upon in the media and other anti-aircraft weapons the mujahideen employed,

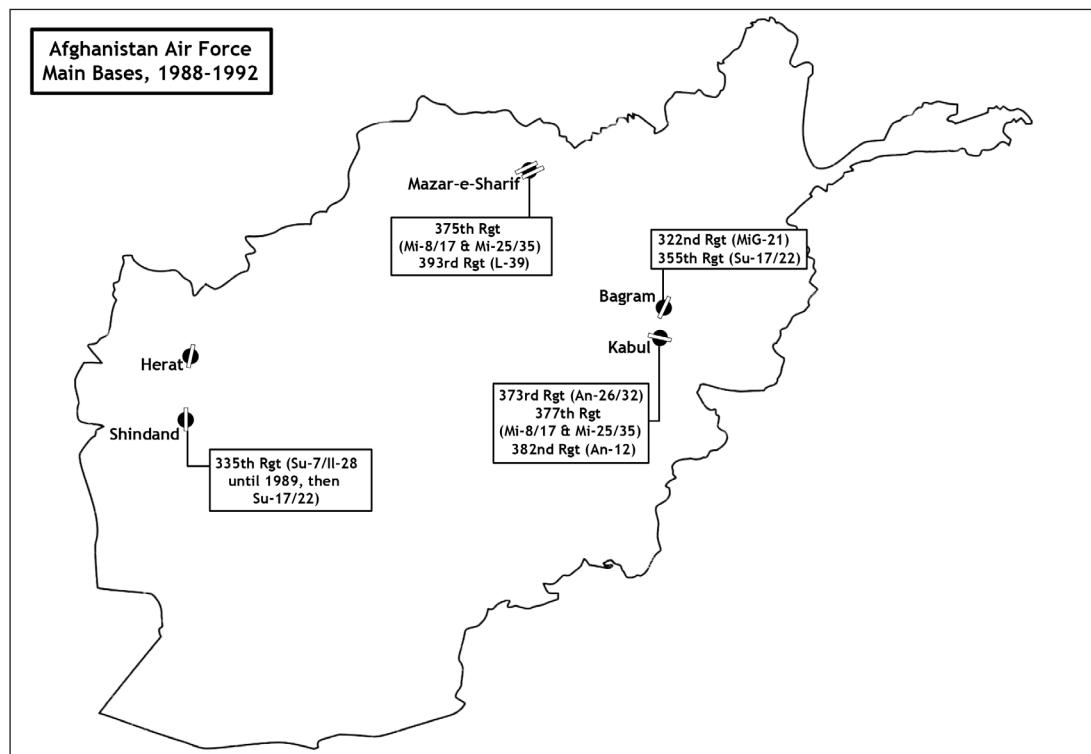
many – especially helicopters and transport aircraft – were destroyed by machine guns and artillery fire while on the ground.⁹ A high portion of the above-mentioned losses were also caused by accidents due to pilot error, lack of discipline, or technical issues. According to another source, in 1989 alone, the AAF lost 109 aircraft of all types.¹⁰

Although during their pull-out the Soviets delivered most of what the Afghan military asked for, huge amount of military hardware was being left idle

at various military bases as there was an enormous lack of properly trained personnel: indeed, in every branch of the Afghan military, there were acute shortages of manpower actually capable of utilising newly delivered hardware. The Afghan air force could not avoid these problems either. Although through the 1980s thousands of airmen and mechanics were trained, primarily in the USSR and Afghanistan itself, new pilots were still needed due to the sheer number of newly delivered aircraft and the high number of losses.

In general, the majority of Afghan pilots reportedly came from noble Pashtun or Tajik families; jet pilots typically came from the wealthiest, while pilots of other types of aircraft came from less well-to-do roots. If true, this indicates some corruption in the selection process.¹¹ Undoubtedly, pilots were considered the elite of the Afghan armed forces, though the quality of recruits was often inadequate. For example, when in autumn 1990 a Soviet medical commission arrived in Kabul to select 60 trainees for Soviet flying schools, only 35 were accepted out of 2,500 candidates, with the primary reasons being candidates' illiteracy and bad health.¹² The ability of the air force to maintain its equipment was also limited as there were shortages of trained mechanics: up to 1989, the training of mechanics in all branches of the Afghan military was neglected by the MoD.¹³

Apart from the above-mentioned problems, a grave issue that affected the ability of the government military to wage effective anti-mujahideen campaigns were not only desertions of individual soldiers but also large-scale defections of entire units to the opposition. From the Saur revolution of 1978 to 1992, probably hundreds of thousands of troops turned against the government or simply fled. Not surprisingly, the level of defections was highest among conscripts who often had no sympathy for the regime that was promoting values perceived – especially by the traditional society in the countryside – as un-Islamic, immoral or outright evil. Defections occurred even in the generally reliable and pro-regime Afghan air force. For example, on 6 July 1989, Captain Jan Pahrand flew his Su-22M4 red 804 to Peshawar in Pakistan. On 29 September 1989, Pahrand was followed by 22-year old Captain Jalal Uddin Wardak who also flew his MiG-21bis red 957 to Peshawar and requested political asylum. Interestingly, while his MiG went to the Pakistan Air Force Museum in Karachi, in 1996 the pilot returned to Afghanistan and resumed his career, flying for the Taliban. In February 1989, two Mi-35s landed in the Panjshir Valley and their pilots together with four communist officers defected to Ahmad Shah Massoud. The Tajik commander could not utilise the machines in combat though, because he had no fuel to fly them or equipment to maintain them, although the helicopters survived this stage of the war intact and later were pressed into service again. Throughout the



Major air bases in Afghanistan, and locally based units up until 1992. (Map by Tom Cooper)



The operational service of Il-28 bombers in Afghanistan ended only in 1989. Although home-based at Shindand AB, in the west of the country, this machine ended its career at Bagram AB, north of Kabul. (Photo by Santiago Flores)

1980s and up to 1992, mujahideen parties did not establish any air force of their own, despite their fighters capturing many helicopters intact or with just minor damage. The reason was that the mujahideen simply had no kind of support to keep the machines working and even if they had returned any of the helicopters to flyable condition and found pilots to fly them, the helicopters would probably have been destroyed by the Soviet or Afghan air force in no time. For example, when several Mi-8s mistakenly landed in a garrison compound in the province of Kunar that had just been overrun by Hekmatyar's Hezb-e

Islami guerrillas, AAF fighter-bombers pounded the site with bombs a short time afterwards.¹⁴ Thus, survival of those two Mi-35s that defected to the Panjshir can be seen more as an exception than a rule.

Although the mujahideen did not have an air force, they gradually developed significant anti-aircraft capabilities and were able to inflict serious losses upon the AAF. The leading role of the US in supplying the mujahideen with advanced anti-aircraft weapons, including the FIM-92 Stinger MANPADS is widely recognised. Both Soviet and Afghan air forces suffered considerable losses from the very start of the civil war and the introduction of Stingers in 1986 only made flying even more dangerous, especially when an aircraft was descending, ascending after take-off or attacking from within the Stingers' operational envelope. Aside from Stingers, mujahideen parties were supplied with American FIM-43 Redeye, Chinese HN-5 and British Blowpipe MANPADS and also managed to capture some SA-7s from the Afghan or Soviet army. Anti-aircraft guns such as DShK, ZPU-1, and ZU-23-2 were commonplace all over the country.

Pro-Government Militias: A Dangerous Time Bomb

For proper understanding of developments that led to the end of the Afghan communist regime and subsequent fragmentation of the country, it is important to at least briefly mention an important phenomenon of the late 1980s and early 1990s: pro-government militia forces. The Afghan government began

creating irregular formations in the early 1980s. After the Soviet pull-out, their number and power rapidly increased up to the point when they became a destabilising factor instead of a guarantor of the regime's survival.

The government had originally created militia forces to incorporate segments of the local population that otherwise rejected military service in the state system.¹⁵ Pro-government militias that were mainly active in the countryside provided a functional counterweight to mujahideen guerrillas who until the last few years of their anti-



The Afghan air force kept its last Su-7BMKs active until 1989, when all were replaced by more advanced Su-17s. The wreckage of this example was photographed at Bagram AB. (US DoD/National Archives)

communist jihad never managed to occupy any large city but were relatively free to roam in deserts and mountains, often bringing large areas of the countryside under their undisputed control.

The most well-known – and militarily the most capable – militia was formed in the northern province of Jowzjan with Abdul Rashid Dostum as its commander. Officially, this irregular unit of savage combatants was designated as the 53rd Division. As this militia was one of a few units that could be effectively used in combat outside its home territory, the government repeatedly airlifted it to areas of particular importance, from Kandahar to Kabul to Jalalabad. Dostum's fighters, who were recruited from Uzbek settlements of Jowzjan, soon gained a reputation as fearless and brutal fighters, and their deployment to Pashtun areas started being criticised even by some communist officers of Pashtun descent.

Another famous militia commander was Sayed Mansour Naderi, the spiritual leader of a small Shi'a Ismaili community in the province of Baghlan who decided to work with the government and secure his area against mujahideen incursions. Militia units, however, were active in virtually all areas of the country and their leaders actually controlled large portions of Afghan territory. In some cases, these formations came into existence through a government decision, while others were former mujahideen groups whose commanders defected to the government, typically for a sum of money or deliveries of military hardware – an offer that proved to be particularly seductive.¹⁶ In fact, while the government army suffered from large-scale desertions to the mujahideen, many opposition leaders were joining Najibullah who guaranteed them resources and weapons. It is estimated that in the early 1990s, as many as 100,000 mujahideen joined Najibullah.

All militias were paid, supplied, and armed by the government which equipped them even with heavy weaponry such as tanks, APCs, and IFVs. As a result, the government practically created a 'military class' of warlords that were dependent on the Afghan state to retain influence in their areas. At the same time, Najibullah's power started to be increasingly dependent on these warlords as their units grew larger and were better motivated than regular army units. In some places, the regular army was vastly outnumbered and outgunned by the militias and state control was actually very limited.

The looming problem was that militia commanders who were not bound by ideology or a common cause paid allegiance to the government only as long as it could provide them with resources. When in 1992 the Soviet aid ceased to pour into the country and Najibullah could no longer support the militias, pro-government warlords actively rose against him. After Najibullah's fall in April 1992, the militias continued to control large areas of Afghanistan and some

of their leaders – such as Dostum and Naderi – even created their own air forces and continued to rule their fiefdoms until defeated by the Taliban.

The Government Victory in Jalalabad

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, many politicians and military figures in Pakistan, Arab countries and in the West were predicting that the communist regime would not be able to survive for more than a few months, maybe a year. However, this overtly optimistic perception of the situation was shaken after the battle of Jalalabad, one of the most important encounters of the entire war. The battle lasted from March until June 1989 and ended in the rout of the mujahideen, while the regime came out ever more confident of its own military capabilities.

Preparations for the mujahideen attack on Jalalabad, the capital of the eastern province of Nangarhar, had been conducted by Pakistani-based mujahideen parties and elements within the Pakistani ISI who calculated that a 'liberated' Jalalabad would serve as a mujahideen capital, providing the anti-regime parties with recognition and serving as a morale boost for their fighters and supporters. Jalalabad could also have served as a launching pad for the planned offensive against Kabul itself.¹⁷

The province of Nangarhar had been a hotbed of anti-communist opposition from the very start of the jihad. As it shares a long, mountainous, and virtually uncontrollable border with Pakistan, it had long been a scene of battles between the Afghan and Soviet armies on one side and mujahideen fighters on the other. While the mujahideen in most cases resorted to guerrilla-style hit and run attacks, the planned offensive of 1989 was to be the first one in which mujahideen forces would perform a conventional attack against one of the most heavily defended cities in the country. Before the offensive, anti-regime parties gathered a force of 5-7,000 (some sources say as many as 15,000), mainly consisting of Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami and Sayyaf's Ittihad-e Islami guerrillas, but also including members of other parties and some jihadi fighters from Arab countries.¹⁸ The mujahideen were supported by a small number of captured tanks, MRLS and a plethora of captured artillery pieces. What certainly boosted the opposition's morale were mass defections of regime soldiers in Nangarhar province that occurred after the Soviet withdrawal, during which many regime positions and pieces of hardware were given to the enemy.

In the weeks before the attack, however, mujahideen preparations outside Jalalabad could not be hidden from the government's view. Moreover, confident mujahideen commanders boasted that the city would fall within a week and were very open about their plans. Thus,

government forces had known about the offensive well in advance, which gave them enough time to prepare sufficient defences, lay additional minefields around the city and increase the number of soldiers in Jalalabad to around 15,000.

The battle began on 6 March when groups of mujahideen fighters attacked from the east while cutting the Kabul-Jalalabad road in the west, putting the city under a siege that was soon breached, however, when the government forces reopened the road from Kabul. Initially, the mujahideen advanced swiftly, capturing an important government garrison in the village of Samarkhel eight kilometres east of Jalalabad and even getting close to the airport which lies approximately two kilometres from the city. While the government later insisted that the airport was never captured by the attackers, the opposition stated that they had overrun it in the first days of the offensive, which is consistent with the fact that there were no flights to and from the airport until 11 March when the government announced its reopening. No matter the conflicting reports, mujahideen artillery and rockets were hitting the airport's runway, buildings and other installations at the site from the very beginning of the Jalalabad battle. The mujahideen also targeted military and civilian objects within the city itself. Their bombardment was heavy indeed: during just a short period of 24 hours between 12-13 March, Jalalabad was reportedly hit by 12,000 rockets and artillery shells. However, mujahideen barrages did not cause any damage to the AAF as at the time of the attack, there were no aircraft at the airport with the exception of one derelict Ariana Airlines An-24. Thanks to the stubborn resistance of the 1st Army Corps under command of General Mohammad Asif Delawar, after a relatively fast advance the mujahideen were brought to a halt.

What certainly was not an advantage to the attackers was the featureless terrain around the city. As Jalalabad lies in the middle of an open plain with almost no natural obstacles to hide behind, regime aircraft, tanks, and artillery were very effective in taking down mujahideen targets. When the mujahideen deployed their tanks in a conventional way for the first time in the entire civil war, performing a frontal attack in open terrain, they were smashed by the defenders very quickly. In response to the fighting around Jalalabad, the Soviet Union intensified the airlift of weapons and food for the government and from 15 March onwards dozens of flights were landing at Kabul airport every day.

Meanwhile, Jalalabad airport was busy with night traffic: as the mujahideen were armed with MANPADS and anti-aircraft artillery, the only at least partially safe way of delivering much needed supplies were landings and take-offs under the cover of the night. These flights were primarily served by An-32s of 373rd Regiment with crews trained for night operations. With mujahideen permanently within sight of the airport, aircraft lights had to be turned off well before landing while the tarmac was illuminated by headlights from trucks just for the shortest possible time. Unloading of ammunition, food, and other supplies was performed in complete darkness, as were the take-offs. Operating aircraft under such conditions was not without risks: for example, one An-32 manned by a civilian crew was hit by a MANPADS when the crew turned off the lights too late, revealing the plane's position to the mujahideen; the pilot eventually managed to perform an emergency landing in which two people died.¹⁹ Beside An-32s, night flights were also served by other aircraft available, including An-26s and even one civilian Yak-40. Transport helicopters of the Kabul-based 377th Regiment were used extensively as well, performing around 10 flights a day. They either approached Jalalabad in a very low flight or were moving above the operational envelope of shoulder-launched SAMs and other AA weapons, descending sharply just moments before reaching the airport.

The Afghan air force was not only essential in providing the air bridge for the encircled city but also in supporting ground operations. Fighter-bombers of the 355th Regiment were performing dozens combat sorties every day, attacking artillery positions and concentrations of mujahideen forces. Beside Su-22s, MiG-21s of the 322nd Regiment commanded by Colonel Mukhtar Gol were engaged in bombing missions as well, usually equipped with two 500kg bombs. The AAF even transformed a few of its An-12s of the 382nd Regiment, commanded by General Ghulam Mohammad Lodin, into bombers by equipping them with improvised bomb-releasing mechanisms in their cargo bays. These makeshift bombers would circle high over the battlefield, avoiding anti-aircraft weapons and hitting concentrations of mujahideen with cluster bombs and were usually covered by a pair of MiG-21s of the 322nd Regiment armed with R-60 air-to-air missiles. As the transports-turned-bombers operated close to the Pakistani border AAF commanders were afraid of possible attacks by PAF fighters that, however, never occurred. An-12s were not the only transports delivering 'lethal cargo' though: photographs also show An-26 and An-32 medium transport aircraft equipped with weapon pylons installed under the fuselage and indicate that the AAF flew bombing missions using these types as well.

With mujahideen dangerously close to Jalalabad airport, the government army decided to prepare a small landing zone for helicopters west of the city and hidden from the enemy. Here, two Mi-24s were permanently based, ready for action. When government army units identified a mujahideen artillery post, they passed the information to helicopter crews that could react very quickly and destroy the target before it changed its position.

The government's use of air power during the battle of Jalalabad was extensive and proved crucial for keeping the enemy at bay; the total number of daily sorties by all involved aircraft combined was well above 100.²⁰ The intensive air operations were not without losses; for example, on 11 March, a MiG-21bis manned by Mukhtar Gol was hit by a Stinger missile approximately 20km north-east of Jalalabad and the pilot died in the crash. Three days later, another Stinger downed a Mi-24 of the 377th Regiment, killing the crew of two. Government sources stated that the AAF lost over a dozen aircraft in total during the battle for Jalalabad.

To the mujahideen, it was clear from the very start of the operation that controlling the city's airport was the key to winning the entire offensive. After being pushed away from the airport on 11 March, they launched another large-scale attack 10 days later, slowly bringing the airport area under their control. When the information about the critical situation of government forces reached the defence minister General Shahnawaz Tanai, he decided to board a helicopter and fly to Jalalabad to personally lead units at the airport. Immediately after Tanai's helicopter arrived at the site it was targeted by small arms fire as part of the airport was already in the hands of the mujahideen.²¹ After a fierce battle, the Afghan army eventually prevailed, however, and brought the entire airport under government control.

By 24 March, the situation on the frontlines around Jalalabad reached a stalemate with mujahideen unable to breach into the city and government forces unable to push the enemy back to the mountains. While for the regime units this was not a serious problem, mujahideen with their poor logistics and limited supplies were caught in a situation they had not expected and had not been prepared for. Their military activity decreased and eventually, in June 1989, the whole offensive ended in an undisputed government victory while the retreating mujahideen groups started attacking each other.

There could be no doubt that the AAF played an essential role in bringing mujahideen pressure to a halt: as for the entire 1980s,

thanks to Soviet support, the government's aerial bombardment was overwhelming. Recently delivered Scud missile systems proved to be an effective weapon as well. These were based around Kabul, manned by both Afghan crews and their Soviet advisers, and were used in insanely high numbers: during the battle of Jalalabad alone, approximately 400 Scuds were fired at concentrations of mujahideen forces. Although Scuds were not especially precise weapons, they still had a demoralizing effect on oppositional fighters because they could not be stopped in any way and could fall literally anywhere without warning. The total number of Scuds fired by the Afghan army between 1989 and 1992 reportedly reached 1,000.

An important factor which also contributed to the regime's eventual victory was the brutal behaviour of foreign jihadists who tortured and killed defecting regime soldiers and civilians.²² The foreign fighters' attitude to government defectors was different from that of Afghan mujahideen who often treated regime soldiers relatively well and even accepted them in their own ranks. Such friendly behaviour often encouraged the regime's fighters to defect in even higher numbers. Nevertheless, after Jalalabad's defenders learned about the miserable fate of their captured comrades, they knew that in this battle, going over to the mujahideen was not an option, and they fought even harder. Another problem on the mujahideen side was lack of coordination amongst units with different party backgrounds. Although Pakistani officers present at the site tried to overcome communication and coordination issues, their activities were mostly in vain. One of the mujahideen commanders later complained: "One group could be attacking, while the group on the other side was sleeping."²³ Moreover, many influential oppositional commanders were openly against attacking Jalalabad and did not provide fighters for the operation, arguing that the mujahideen were not yet capable of waging conventional warfare and that an attack against a heavily defended city would end in a disaster. As history shows, these commanders were absolutely right.

General Tanai's Failed Coup

In early March 1990, Afghanistan witnessed an anti-Najibullah coup attempt that, if successful, would certainly have changed the course of the country's history. While after the Jalalabad battle and successful campaigns of Dostum's militia against Massoud's forces in the north, the regime was confident that it has the power to defend itself against the opposition even without direct Soviet assistance, the real danger was hiding within. In 1988, General Shahnawaz Tanai had been appointed a new minister of defence after Najibullah's attempt to lure Ahmad Shah Massoud to the government side and award him with this prestigious position had failed. Tanai, a hard-line Pashtun Khalqi nationalist, was a supporter and friend of Najibullah – who was a member of the Parcham faction – but their attitudes were gradually more and more in opposition. While Najibullah's strategy was a policy of national reconciliation and de-escalation of the conflict, Tanai was seen as a hawk. He continually pressed for a military solution and he reportedly even suggested launching Scud missiles against the Pakistani capital of Islamabad in retaliation for Pakistani support of the mujahideen. Moreover, as Tanai witnessed his Khalqi faction being side-lined by the Parchami president, his dissatisfaction with the regime grew even stronger. Tanai, who was a professional soldier, was also angered by the growing power of largely non-Pashtun militias that were not part of the regular army and that were playing a more important role than ever before, even side-lining the regular armed forces.

In August 1989, the Afghan secret service uncovered a network of Pashtun Khalqi figures who had secretly established contacts with

Hezb-e Islami. As a consequence, 127 Khalqi officers were arrested. Trial of the accused collaborators was scheduled to start in spring 1990 which prompted General Tanai, who was also in touch with Hezb-e Islami, to act to save the plotters: thus, on 6 March 1990 the general launched a coup attempt against the Parchami president.

Before the coup, Tanai had won support not only of the air force chief of staff Abdul Qadir Aqa and most of the personnel of the 322nd and 355th regiments at Bagram AB but also of the 15th Tank Brigade based outside the capital. Indeed, despite playing the role of one of the most stable pillars of the armed forces and the regime in general, internally the AAF was deeply divided between the Khalq and Parcham factions and Commander Aqa found enough pilots who were willing to participate in the coup. On 6 March, fighter jets from Bagram began flying attacks against government buildings in Kabul, while on the ground the tank brigade was heading to the capital to smash the presidential palace where Najibullah was almost killed when a 500kg bomb hit the building.²⁴ At the same time, in a sign of coordination, Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami fighters launched attacks against government positions around the heavily guarded capital.

However, Kabul-based units of the government military stayed loyal to the president and due to heavy anti-aircraft fire, bombing raids by Commander Aqa's jets proved ineffective. Moreover, some of the pilots that took off to participate in the attacks apparently stayed loyal to Najibullah and defected from the coup, landing their aircraft at airports that were in government hands.²⁵ Kabul militia units, especially the elite Special Guard led by the Interior Minister Mohammad Aslam Watanjar – who was a Khalqi but remained loyal to the president – played a major role in halting Tanai's armoured attack. Khalqi forces in the Interior Ministry, most of which were stationed outside Kabul, remained neutral.²⁶ In retaliation for the air raids against Kabul, Bagram AB was targeted by intensive air strikes by Su-22 fighter-bombers operating from Mazar-e Sharif and by BM-22 Uragan heavy MRLS. As a result, no less than 46 aircraft were damaged or destroyed on the ground, although 34 were subsequently repaired.²⁷

On the next day, it was clear that the coup had failed. General Tanai who was personally present at Bagram, boarded a helicopter and flew to Pakistan, followed by An-12 serialled 380 which was full of coup plotters and their family members. Once in Pakistan, Tanai and other officers were officially welcomed by Pakistani government officials while Hekmatyar openly expressed his support for the plotters, even making Tanai a commander of one of Hezb-e Islami's units. Other major Pakistani-based Afghan opposition figures were meanwhile keeping their distance as they saw Tanai as nothing more than an untrustworthy opportunist.

Thus, thanks to loyal commanders, the Najibullah government survived but was considerably shaken. Najibullah's distrust towards Khalqists and the government apparatus in general led him to govern through his personal allies, despite many more Khalqists being purged from the party. As a result, even more members of the Khalq faction began looking for allies among Pashtun-led jihadi parties which led to many defections and, later, the fragmentation of the state structures, including the army and the air force, along ethnic lines.

Beginning of the End

The battle of Jalalabad, Tanai's attempted coup, and many less serious crises and encounters had proven that the Najibullah government could withstand pressure from both the mujahideen and the internal opposition. There was, however, one important precondition for the government's success: the aid coming from the USSR. During 1990, the so-far relatively stable Soviet Union began to shake and in 1991 it slowly

headed towards its dissolution which came at the very end of the year. Naturally, for the newly independent Russia facing a vast array of grave challenges, the fate of the Najibullah regime was unimportant. Certain mujahideen leaders had even been invited to talk to Moscow shortly before the break-up of the Soviet Union.²⁸ After the talks, the USSR Foreign Ministry stated that the sides confirmed the necessity of transfer of state power in Afghanistan to an interim Islamic government – a stance that a few years earlier would have been absolutely unimaginable.²⁹

As the situation of the Najibullah regime deteriorated, the Afghan army suffered several important setbacks in the field, although these were caused more by dysfunctional logistics and the army commanders' tendency to surrender than by the army's inferiority in direct confrontations with the mujahideen who continued to be fragmented and plagued by infighting.

The heaviest blow inflicted by the anti-Najibullah opposition was the capture of Khost, an important regional centre and the capital of Khost province, in March 1991. For most of the 1980s, Khost garrison was sustained only by transport aircraft and helicopters as all land routes were blocked by various mujahideen commanders. Thanks to aerial support and heavy weapons, the government military dominated in the area around the city while the surrounding mountains stayed firmly under mujahideen control. This stalemate lasted for years and it was only in early 1991 that the mujahideen, led by the famous Jalaluddin Haqqani, succeeded in mounting a successful offensive which was actually coordinated and planned by Pakistani ISI officers. At the time of the offensive, local government units were lacking supplies and were not particularly eager to offer resistance. This certainly helped the attackers who eventually managed to breach the defensive positions of the army, killing around 500 soldiers and forcing Khost garrison to surrender. Crucial targets of the mujahideen were the old and new airports outside the city: the mujahideen managed to get so close to them that they could prevent transport aircraft from flying resupply missions and two Antonovs attempting to deliver supplies were shot down.³⁰ A month-long battle that was absolutely incomparable to the fierce fighting around Jalalabad in 1989 ended in a typical Afghan way: regime representatives were granted free passage to Kabul, while the captured regime soldiers were mostly allowed to leave the place or join the mujahideen. The mujahideen eventually pillaged both the city and the airports where they found the carcasses of many An-26 and An-32 transport aircraft that had been destroyed on the ground in previous rounds of fighting. According to General Azimi, during the 11-year long siege of Khost, the Afghan air force lost 51 Antonov transport aircraft either on the ground or during take-offs and landings. After the fall of Khost, the government retaliated only with a Scud attack against the city that, however, remained firmly in mujahideen hands.

In the north-eastern province of Takhar, a similar scenario occurred when the local government forces that in previous rounds of the war had been boosted by a large contingent of Dostum's militiamen collapsed under pressure from Massoud's fighters.



Su-17s, and their export variant Su-22s, represented the heaviest and most advanced fighter-bombers of the Afghan air force throughout the 1980s. Usually armed with unguided bombs, they proved highly popular with their crews. This still from a video shows Su-22M-4K serial number 822 while flying combat operations against Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami as they were trying to infiltrate Kabul in the late April 1992. (Mark Lepko Collection)

Again, among the main reasons were dysfunctional logistics and the tendency to surrender. The government army commander personally flew to Kabul to ask for supplies but all his attempts were in vain. The provincial capital of Taloqan fell to Massoud and Hekmatyar, although Hekmatyar's fighters were expelled from the city by the famous Tajik commander shortly after. Taloqan served as a kind of capital for Massoud's Shura-e Nazar that even began issuing license plates for civilian cars and established the very first mujahideen bank. The only government reaction was occasional retaliatory bombing of the city conducted by AAF jets and, for example, on 4 September 1991, an aerial attack performed by Su-22s operating from Mazar-e Sharif killed at least 80 civilians.³¹ From a military point of view, these bombings were meaningless and their only aim apparently was punishing the civilian population in areas controlled by the opposition.

On the other hand, when the government units were better motivated, supplied and led by a decisive commander, they were still able to hit the enemy hard. For example, the operation aimed at clearing the area of Paghman outside the country's capital ended in an absolute government victory, although the force that ensured the success of the offensive was Dostum's Jowzjani militia rather than the regular Afghan army. Another example of a government success was the siege of Zinda Jan district in Herat province where government units forced Ismail Khan, a famous Jamiat-e Islami commander active in western Afghanistan, onto the defensive and brought his forces to the verge of defeat. As the operation proceeded, however, in early 1992 the government commander General Rauf Baigi was replaced by General Asif Delawar who – for reasons not clear – lifted the siege, effectively ending the entire enterprise and securing for Ismail Khan his most important military victory to date. In reality the claimed success was bestowed upon him by the crumbling government's military.³²

The government's will to make compromises and cede control of less-important areas can also be illustrated by its agreement over fuel supplies with Iran. In 1991, eager to find an alternative source from which to obtain the much-needed fuel, the government started buying this commodity from Iran which was granted direct air access to the Shi'a inhabited Hazarajat region in return. Thus, Iranian transport aircraft began supplying Shi'a mujahideen forces in central Afghanistan while the Government de-facto recognised its inability or unwillingness to engage itself militarily in that part of the country.³³

The Fall of Kabul

Trying to contain the growing power of the militias, from late 1991, Najibullah started taking steps to re-establish full control over the northern provinces, namely by sending Pashtun officers to take over command of Tajik and Uzbek militia units. Unsurprisingly, this further alienated non-Pashtun militia leaders. In January 1992, in an ill-fated effort to reassert his control over supply lines leading from the newly-independent republic of Uzbekistan to Kabul, Najibullah sent a Pashtun Khalqi officer, General Rasul, to replace Tajik general Abdul Momin as the commander of the 70th Division – which in fact was a militia formation – based in the crucial border town of Hairatan where large stockpiles of military hardware and ammunition that the USSR had sent in the final months of its existence were stockpiled. This move ignited the large-scale opposition of northern militia commanders who were resolutely against ceding their power to anyone else, especially the Pashtuns. The first who opposed Najibullah was General Momin himself who quickly got backing from Dostum, although in this stage of the confrontation none of the commanders directly attacked Najibullah's units present in the area. Momin and Dostum were soon joined by other militia commanders including the Isma'ili community leader Sayed Mansour Naderi, who commanded the 80th Division, and gradually also by many local mujahideen leaders of Hezb-e Wahdat, Hezb-e Islami, Jamiat-e Islami and others, creating a loose, multi-party alliance of military commanders called Harakat-e Shamal (Movement of the North), nominally under command of Dostum.³⁴ Allegedly as early as 1990, Dostum had said during a visit to Moscow that Uzbeks and Turkmens of northern Afghanistan would not tolerate Pashtun command of everything as in the past.³⁵ Two years later he finally proved he was serious.

With the financial and material aid from the USSR no longer available – for example, by January 1992 the Afghan air force could not keep up the usual pace of operations due to lack of fuel³⁶ – and with northern provinces in the hands of opposing militias, the regime's power began to crumble even faster. Najibullah could no longer send money to loyal militia leaders throughout the country and they were soon considering alternative ways of sustaining their power and influence in their regions. For the government army generals, the UN-sponsored peace talks offered only a very uncertain future. It is no wonder that in this situation, more and more government figures began establishing contacts with either militia commanders or mujahideen leaders. Indeed, in the first months of 1992, it was clear to everyone that the Najibullah regime's days were numbered. General Mohammad Nabi Azimi contacted Dostum in the middle of March and other government commanders established contacts to various militias or mujahideen groups as well or started making preparations to leave the country.

On 18 March, under pressure of UN envoy Benon Sevan, Najibullah declared that he was willing to step down. On the very next day, Dostum proclaimed an alliance with Massoud and openly confronted Najibullah, capturing the largest northern city of Mazar-e Sharif where a pro-Najibullah Khalqi commander was forced to relinquish power at gunpoint. The victorious Dostum took Mazar-e Sharif airport where dozens of jets, helicopters and transport aircraft were stationed, and he also took control of Deh Dadi airport outside the city. This was the moment when the first of many 'private' Afghan air forces came into being.

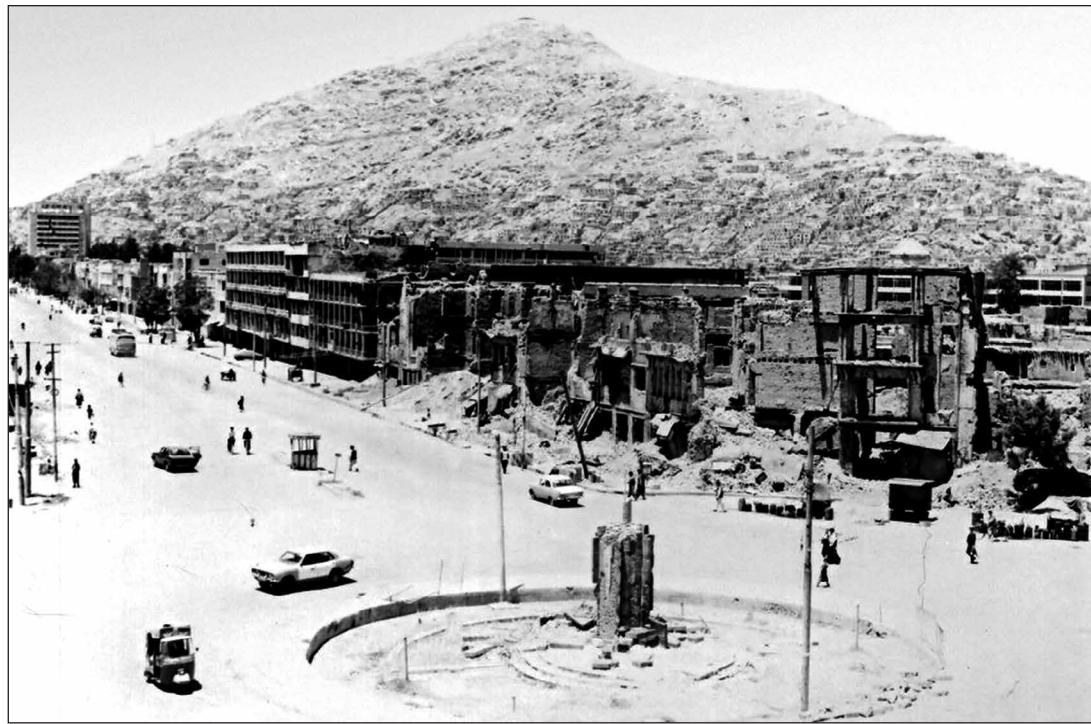
As a result of Dostum's action, Kabul was now effectively encircled as the northern borders with the newly independent Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were under control of Dostum and Massoud, while the Pakistani border was controlled by various Pashtun mujahideen parties. Quite surprisingly,

the remaining Soviet advisors who by that time were representatives of a non-existent country left Afghanistan only in the last days of Najibullah's reign and only on the insistence of the Afghans themselves who were afraid for the advisers' lives. The last ex-Soviet military personnel were evacuated by air no sooner than on the 13 April 1992.³⁷

Meanwhile, the UN continued its efforts to solve the situation in the country by pushing various parties to negotiate a new government. It prepared a plan according to which a pre-interim council of mujahideen representatives would fly to Kabul from Pakistan on 15 April, while President Najibullah would be flown out of Afghanistan on board a UN aircraft after he had formally handed over sovereignty to the pre-interim council. The UN also stated that the mujahideen forces would stay outside Kabul – a well-intentioned plan that in the reality of the conflict was too idealistic to be respected, especially when one of the top mujahideen figures – Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – refused any participation in the UN-sponsored activities.

Meanwhile, intensive negotiations were underway between Kabul-based regular army formations and mujahideen parties over future alliances. To the regime's generals, the need to secure their careers was of crucial importance. While most Tajik and Uzbek Parcham officers tended to lean towards Massoud or Dostum, Pashtun Khalqi commanders were negotiating mostly with Hekmatyar. Although the divide of the former regime military in this fashion was not without exceptions, with some Pashtuns joining non-Pashtun groups and vice-versa, ethnicity was emerging as a dominant factor in the process of forming new military alliances, while ideology was often – even if not always – forgotten. Thus, former hard-line communists of the Khalq faction were shaking hands with hard-line Islamists from Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami.

On 14 April, troops of General Dostum took control of Kabul International Airport after secret talks with General Azimi, who had been in contact with Dostum since March.³⁸ Hundreds of Dostum's militiamen were airlifted to Kabul where they served as protection against a possible attack by Hekmatyar. On the next day, Massoud's forces backed by Dostum and Naderi captured Bagram AB almost without a fight when the local government garrison surrendered. This event gave Massoud control over dozens of operational aircraft of all kinds, together with pilots and mechanics. At the same time, Hezb-e Islami fighters got to the southern outskirts of Kabul and Hekmatyar threatened to invade the city. Groups from several other parties were also waiting close to the capital. In the early hours of 16 April, Najibullah called the UN mission in Kabul and set off to the airport where a UN aircraft had arrived earlier to fly him out to Pakistan even while the mujahideen leaders were still negotiating in Peshawar. However, Dostum's troops guarding the airport were apparently given strict orders not to allow Najibullah out of the country. At their checkpoint, a small convoy of UN cars was stopped at gunpoint and forced to turn back. On the following day, Najibullah resigned as president after four top generals of the Kabul garrison expressed support for Massoud. This move not only complicated the UN plan – mujahideen leaders were still in Peshawar, unable to agree on the pre-interim council – but also created a dangerous power vacuum. Afghanistan was now without any formally accepted governing body. The state administration – which had already been in a very bad shape – was quickly disintegrating and the government army was completely demoralised and unwilling to fight. The four generals who finished Najibullah's rule supported the UN peace plan but also invited Massoud into Kabul and offered him the position of head of state. Massoud, however, declined this offer and ordered his fighters to stay outside the city.



Downtown Kabul after the fighting that ruined most of the city in 1992–1993. (Mark Lepko Collection)

Meanwhile, Hekmatyar's forces got even closer to the capital and soon after some Khalqi officers started allowing Hekmatyar's men into the city, giving them access to heavy weapons. On 25 April, Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami and their Khalqi allies were close to capturing large areas of Kabul, even raising the green Hezb flag over the presidential palace. This was the moment when Massoud – so far reluctant – after breaching Hezb lines north of the capital sent his units into the city as well, with Dostum following suit. Scores of Massoud's seasoned fighters were airlifted to Kabul from Bagram and other assembly points north of the capital on board Antonovs and Mi-17s.

In their Kabul operation, Massoud and Dostum were supported by regular army units of Parcham generals right from the start. Heavy street fighting broke out immediately and on 27 April, Hekmatyar-Khalqi forces were driven to the south of the city, where they would stay up until early 1995. As there was no fight around Kabul airport and the aircraft and facilities at the site were in good condition, jet pilots continued with combat operations against Hekmatyar under the umbrella of the Azimi-Dostum alliance that controlled the airport. Some aircraft had their national markings hastily overpainted with camouflage colours; others had freshly applied traditional Afghan triangle roundels that had been in use in the pre-communist period, while a few were still flying with communist red stars.

Despite being cleansed of Hezb-e Islami forces, Kabul was now divided into zones of control of competing military formations and any prospect for peace that so many Afghans, including a number of politicians and military figures, had hoped for was fading. Massoud's troops captured northern neighbourhoods and the presidential palace, General Dostum held Kabul International Airport and Bala Hissar fortress, while Hezb-e Islami conquered the hills south of the city. Shi'ite Hezb-e Wahdat took control of Hazara neighbourhoods in the west and several smaller political parties' militias also managed to fight their way into the capital. Meanwhile, all over the country other garrisons and cities that had still been under

control of the government surrendered to different mujahideen or militia leaders. Thus, the Republic of Afghanistan was finished.

As Kabul was falling apart, mujahideen parties that had been negotiating in Pakistan finally agreed on a power-sharing agreement called the Peshawar Accords. According to this document, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, a rather weak leader of a small political party (Jebh-e Nejat-e Melli; National Liberation Front) would become an interim president. After two months, he would cede his office to Burhanuddin Rabbani of Jamiat-e Islami who after another four months would be replaced by an interim government. After another 18 months, general elections would be held.

Mojaddedi's government started acting on 28 April 1992 and renamed the country as the Islamic State of Afghanistan. As mujahideen parties and militia commanders were by no means willing to merge their military forces under a unified command, the Mojaddedi government was virtually powerless from the very start of its establishment. Crucially, Hekmatyar – still firmly backed by the Pakistani ISI that had not abandoned its plan to create an obedient, pro-Pakistani Afghan government – opposed the Peshawar Accords and openly stated that he would fight the new rulers in Kabul. A new round of the Afghan civil war was about to begin.

3

ALL AGAINST ALL, 1992–1996

Although many of its components were in very bad shape, the Afghan army had not been defeated in combat and survived until the very end of the Najibullah government. During the weeks before the end of April 1992 and shortly after, various regime army units and garrisons were taken over by victorious parties or former pro-government militia commanders, or actively made alliances with them without

being destroyed or forcefully disbanded. Indeed, with the exception of Mazar-e Sharif where a Khalqi unit briefly resisted Dostum, and of the north-eastern town of Fayzabad where a local garrison surrendered only after a fight, Afghan military formations in other cities joined the other side after negotiations. Most of the mujahideen parties and former pro-regime militias were glad to increase their fighting potential

by incorporating regular army troops and military hardware into their ranks. Ironically, in many cases, the regime units that had fought together against their common mujahideen enemy just days before, were suddenly used by their new masters to fight against each other. Thus, the official, unified Afghan army ceased to exist and the effectiveness of most military units sharply declined, primarily due to desertions, purges, ethnicization, lack of fuel and other supplies, as well as overall mismanagement by mujahideen commanders. The process of disintegration or 'demodernization', however, varied widely: notable was that parts of the army taken over by Massoud in and around Kabul, and those under the umbrella of Dostum's Harakat-e Shamal survived the regime change relatively unaffected. On the other hand, many units that defected to other parties soon turned into irregular formations and some of them quickly disintegrated altogether, although not as a result of defeat in the field. For example, the 99th Rocket Brigade in western Kabul, equipped with Scuds, was overrun by Shi'a Hezb-e Wahdat and Harakat-e Islami parties but the trained personnel apparently fled and the two Shi'a factions were not able to launch a single Scud, only showing them to the cheering public during military parades. In the Pashtun south and east of the country, where Afghan government units were taken over by more radical Islamic parties or tribal commanders, the steep decline of the regular army was most evident: purges of former regime officers were commonplace, jihadi commanders inexperienced in leading large military units assumed top positions and due to widespread chaos, remnants of the army quickly turned into irregular formations or dissolved completely. In Kandahar and some other Pashtun-dominated areas, mujahideen leaders even sold or redistributed tanks and the other heavy weaponry of the units that allied with them to various commanders and tribal alliances, which meant that the units in question practically ceased to exist. Some mujahideen advocated abolition of military uniforms and suggested compulsory prayers five times a day. With the exception of units that joined Dostum, Massoud or Ismail Khan, regular army formations were non-existent by 1993 at the latest.¹ Rather surprisingly, both mujahideen and ex-communist militia leaders retained the former government unit designations and did not introduce their own new system. Thus, for example Ismail Khan continued to command 4th Corps in Herat and Mulla Naqibullah commanded 2nd Corps in Kandahar, although the actual strength and combat readiness of these formations were not comparable to their previous state and they certainly did not deserve being called 'corps'.

The Afghan air force was not exempt from this chaos. By April 1992, it ceased to function as a single entity as airports, aircraft and personnel were divided among victorious parties, forming their new air arms. In reality, the situation at airfields was complicated and often outright desperate. Without supplies from the USSR and with no



A group of Jamiat-e Islami officials getting off an Antonov An-32 transport – that probably belonged to Dostum – at Kabul International in 1992. The aircraft wore a disruptive camouflage pattern in dark sand, and two or three shades of green on top surfaces and sides. (Mark Lepko Collection)



Many of the former communist regime air force's aircraft were left idle immediately after April 1992 and never re-activated. This Su-22 of 355th Regiment based at Bagram was one of them: even as of 2002, when this photograph was taken, the aircraft still wore the markings of the former DRAAF. (Photo by Santiago Flores)

other foreign power willing to provide support, the pace of operations rapidly slowed down. At some airfields, flying activity stopped almost entirely, although there were still a lot of aircraft in working condition. Again, the most favourable situation was at bases controlled by Dostum and Massoud, while most of those controlled by other formations nearly ceased to function. Fundamentalist parties tended to mistreat former regime officers, including pilots, technicians and other staff and often appointed new commanders from the ranks of mujahideen who knew nothing about administration of regular army units or the requirements for operating sophisticated weapons. Negligence and chaos caused by the new leadership only deepened already severe logistical issues. In this situation, many pilots and ground crews had very low motivation in serving and simply quit their job, often emigrating abroad, typically to Pakistan or Russia. Keeping aircraft



Another example of an aircraft that was not used after the mujahideen victory was this MiG-21bis of 322nd Regiment from Bagram AB. (Photo by Santiago Flores)

operational became more and more difficult and their number slowly, yet steadily declined: the once mighty Afghan Air Force dissolved into several air forces or small air arms of various level of professionalism and combat readiness. Eventually, the only serious attempt to build a new air force upon the ruins of those of the warring factions was that of the Taliban in the second half of the 1990s.

Along with the above-mentioned issues, a crucial problem that emanated from the semi-regular or irregular nature of various parties' and commanders' military organisations was that of command and control. In the post-Najibullah environment, the gradual decline of different military units resulted in a situation in which remnants of the regular military – including the air force – usually came under the direct command of a major warlord or a party leader while the rest of the fighting force comprised irregular groups commanded by relatively independent local strongmen. These groups in turn consisted of a plethora of even smaller units down to the level of village militias. Importantly, fighters were personally loyal foremost to their direct superiors who they knew and respected. Ideology or other kinds of common cause that would bind the disparate groupings into a coherent fighting force usually played only a minor role or no role, a factor that could easily lead to defections: indeed, if a local militia leader or a 'regular unit' officer decided to switch sides, his men usually followed him. Moreover, the willingness of local fighters to risk their lives outside their native territory was typically low as was local commanders' appetite to send their men to fight distant battles that would bring them no clear benefits. It is no wonder that in such conditions the mobilisation of a large fighting force was almost impossible. For example, although by 1993 Dostum reportedly had around 120,000 troops at his disposal, he could field only a fraction of this number at any given moment. Naturally, the necessity of seeking the consent of many semi-independent commanders to send their men to battle hampered any kind of large-scale offensive operations, especially as military leaders were often reluctant to accept orders from their designated superiors. Leading such a disunited force into battle against a militarily capable – or just better organised or better motivated – enemy could easily result in disaster as happened, for example, in summer 1995 when the army of Ismail Khan disintegrated under pressure of the Taliban within just a few days of fighting. Generally, the nature of most of the warlords' and political parties' armies during the 1990s civil war was rather feudal and local commanders that maintained their own militias followed their leaders usually only as long as they provided them with resources.

Eventually, it was only the Taliban that at least partially managed to overcome these issues as it incorporated a strong binding ideology and a common cause that provided a unification framework for the otherwise disparate conglomerate of forces.

Air Forces after April 1992

Takeover of major airfields by anti-regime forces in April 1992 (in alphabetical order)

Bases	Parties and commanders
Bagram	Jamiat-e Islami – Ahmad Shah Massoud
Herat	Jamiat-e Islami – Ismail Khan
Kabul	Harakat-e Shamal – Abdul Rashid Dostum
Kandahar	Jebh-e Nejat-e Melli – Haji Ahmad ²
Mazar-e Sharif	Harakat-e Shamal – Abdul Rashid Dostum
Shindand	Hezb-e Islami – Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

In general, airports around Afghanistan saw almost no fighting in the last days of the communist regime and the Afghan air force did not suffer any combat losses when the Najibullah government collapsed. However, during the subsequent civil war, only three military organisations made efforts to maintain truly functional air forces: these were formations of Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and, several years later, the Taliban movement. Other parties and commanders were not capable of operating large numbers of aircraft due to various issues of organisational or logistical nature or they were simply uninterested in such an enterprise. However, some managed to maintain small numbers of helicopters, transport aircraft, and even fighter jets in flyable condition.

It is very difficult to make any estimates regarding the numbers of operational aircraft active within newly created services. At every airbase, many airworthy machines were left idle right from the beginning because there were not enough human and material resources to operate them. It is safe to say that in the last days of the Najibullah government, there were several hundreds of aircraft available but at the same time dozens were already left abandoned by April 1992 and never re-activated. Both combat and non-combat losses as well as problems with maintenance led to a sharp decline in the number of serviceable aircraft, especially when there were almost no opportunities to replenish losses by acquiring new machines from abroad.

Jamiat-e Islami/Massoud/Rabbani government air force

Thanks to its military and organisational strength and political manoeuvring, the full description of which lies outside the scope of this book, by 1992 Jamiat-e Islami was the most influential of all mujahideen organisations. With support from several smaller parties, in June 1992 it formed the new internationally recognised government with Burhanuddin Rabbani replacing Sibghatullah Mojaddedi as president. Ahmad Shah Massoud became the Minister of Defence and former government army general Asif Delawar became the chief of staff. Jamiat-e Islami forces consisting of Massoud's Shura-e Nazar, former regime regular units including the Kabul-based Central Corps, and various semi-independent Jamiat mujahideen formations in the north-east became referred to as the Islamic State of Afghanistan government military forces. In practice the Jamiat-dominated government directly controlled only the north-east of the country and parts of Kabul, which turned into a brutal battlefield. In other areas of Afghanistan, there were more leaders affiliated with Jamiat-e Islami, most notably Ismail Khan in Herat and Mulla Naqibullah Akhund in

Kandahar, but these strongmen were in fact independent and their allegiance to the government was more or less formal. Nevertheless, with Bagram AB firmly in their hands, Massoud's 'government forces' inherited dozens of fighter jets, helicopters, and transport aircraft from the former regime inventory and in the first half of the 1990s it maintained a relatively well-equipped air force that saw intensive combat action, especially against Hekmatyar, Dostum, and later the Taliban. Moreover, Jamiat-e Islami took over the Air Defence HQ in Kabul and continued to operate radars and SA-3 SAMs, albeit with problems. Mohammad Dawran, a MiG-21 pilot who in the 1980s had even undergone training to become a cosmonaut became the new air force and air defence chief.³

Unsurprisingly, due to lack of supplies, the government air force faced issues with fuel and spare parts and had to cannibalise some machines. On the other hand, Jamiat's attitude to former regime soldiers was generally favourable and it seems that there were enough of them to operate the equipment. Former regime officers often retained their positions and many of them continued their military careers under the new government. Soon after the fall of the Najibullah regime, Massoud even made clear that Jamiat would not persecute any AAF pilots and that they would be welcome in the new government's ranks.

Harakat-e Shamal/ Junbish-e Milli/General Dostum's air force

Probably the largest air force operating in the Afghan civil war of the 1990s was that of Abdul Rashid Dostum. The Uzbek general had no real opposition in the northern provinces strong enough to challenge him and he secured the most important air base of Mazar-e Sharif well before April 1992. According to some estimates, Dostum's air force had around 60 aircraft at its disposal.⁴ The first commander of Dostum's air force was General Mohammad Mustafa, who was killed in air combat in 1994 and replaced with General Abdul



Both Dostum and his vasal's units operated several hundred T-54, T-55 and T-62 tanks. This still from a video shows a T-62M carrying a huge portrait of Dostum during a parade – probably in the Uzbek general's stronghold of Sheberghan. (Mark Lepko Collection)



ZIL-131 trucks converted into 'technicals' through the addition of light AA guns such as the ZU-23-2 were a common sight throughout Afghanistan of the 1990s. They were almost exclusively used in ground combat, even if scoring a few kills against aircraft. This still from a video shows a ZIL belonging to Dostum carrying the general's portrait and a large Junbish-e Milli Party emblem on the door, while moving down a street in Mazar-e Sharif. (Mark Lepko Collection)

Jamil who later defected to the Taliban. In comparison with the rest of the country, northern Afghanistan saw relatively little fighting and the regime units based there, including the air force, maintained unity and formed a capable army that even continued to operate radars and probably also SA-3 SAMs. At least in the beginning, Dostum's air force could rely on fuel, spare parts, and ammunition coming

from huge Afghan army depots constructed in northern Afghanistan by the Soviets; an advantage unavailable to other factions. Formed on the basis of the communist regime administration, Dostum's organisation consisted of a large number of former regime figures, and the pilots and other specialists generally had no reason to abandon their jobs. Although Dostum controlled Kabul International Airport, which enabled him to supply his contingent of troops in the capital up to 1994, the importance of this airport was severely diminished by frequent rocket and artillery attacks devastating aircraft, equipment, and runways and making take-offs and landings a dangerous adventure.

Hezb-e Islami/Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's air force

Shindand AB, a major military establishment in western Afghanistan, was occupied by a Hezb-e Islami-affiliated militia after the 21st Division of the communist regime army made alliance with Hekmatyar's party. To their surprise, when the militia commanders took over control of the base from the communist officers, they found Iranian agents trying to organise transfer of spare parts for Su-22 fighter-bombers that had escaped from Iraq to Iran in the beginning of Operation Desert Storm.⁵ It is not known if the Iranians actually obtained any aircraft parts from Afghanistan in the chaotic days before or after the collapse of the Najibullah government, but most probably their efforts led nowhere, especially given the anti-Iranian stance of Hezb-e Islami. Theoretically, taking control of Shindand gave Hezb-e Islami the possibility of possessing an air force of considerable size and power. However, there was not much flying at Shindand after Hezb took over, although Hekmatyar boasted about the creation of his party's air force shortly after Shindand had come under Hezb control.⁶ It seems that the party, despite being one of the major players during the early 1990s power struggle, did not take any steps to establish a truly functioning air force of its own. It was not even able or willing to pay salaries to the air force personnel stationed at Shindand.⁷ Although those few pilots who remained at the base flew some combat sorties during the period when the airport was under Hezb control, the once busy base had probably not been much active until October 1992 when forces of Ismail Khan occupied it after a successful offensive. At Hekmatyar's headquarters at Chahar Asiab, south of Kabul, at least five helicopters reportedly remained active under control of his personal guard unit called the 'Support Group' but their combat deployment is unknown.



The wreckage of this Mi-8T found at Kandahar airport wears the markings of Jamiat-e Islami. (Mark Lepko Collection)



In the 1990s, probably all major factions as well as some of the less influential commanders had some FIM-92 Stingers in their arsenal. Here, three Stingers are shown at a military parade in Herat prior to the city's capture by the Taliban. (Mark Lepko Collection)

Ismail Khan's air force

Ismail Khan, a member of Jamiat-e Islami, took control of former regime aircraft when the 4th Corps based in the city of Herat allied with him in April 1992. There are no reports about the number of machines or overall conditions at the airport, but it is known that Ismail Khan's aircraft were active until late 1995 and some of his helicopters were operational at least until 1997. Ismail Khan's air arm was also bolstered by additional machines captured at Shindand in October 1992 when Khan took control of this air base after defeating Hezb-e Islami militia in the area.

Mulla Naqibullah's air force

In Kandahar, the large international airport came under control of Haji Ahmad, a mujahideen leader from Spin Boldak and follower of interim president Mojaddedi's Jebh-e Nejat-e Melli party. Later, Kandahar airport was taken over by Mulla Naqibullah Akhund, who nominally paid allegiance to Jamiat-e Islami. In the complicated environment of Kandahar, Mulla Naqibullah played a prominent role and during the fall of the communist regime, his forces were joined by the 2nd Corps. However, after the mujahideen takeover, flying activity at the airport remained low and the number of serviceable aircraft sharply declined.



Immediately after the fall of Najibullah, Hezb-e Wahdat captured huge quantity of heavy weapons from the former regime garrisons. Among other hardware, a sole SA-13 SAM was subsequently presented at a military parade in west Kabul, although the Shi'a party militia probably lacked trained crews that could actually use this weapon system in combat. (Mark Lepko Collection)

Sayed Mansour Naderi's air force

The last air arm formed after the fall of Najibullah's regime was that of Sayed Mansour Naderi, one of Dostum's vassals. According to news reports, Naderi used a few Mi-8 or Mi-17 transport helicopters primarily in the province of Baghlan where he had established his

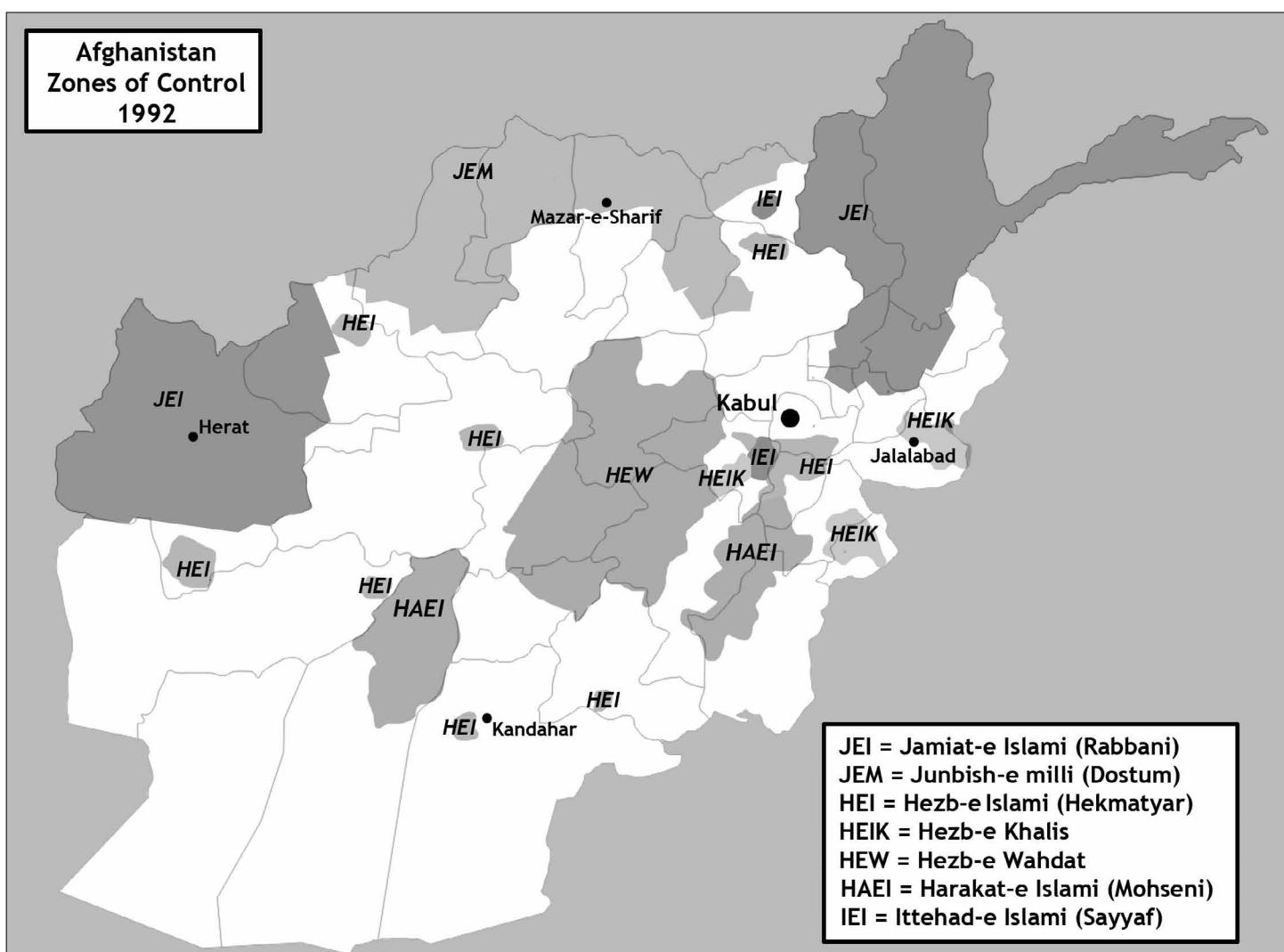
fiefdom already in the 1980s when he had become a pro-government militia leader.

As the civil war continued, at least three or four additional air arms came into play: the Taliban's, Hezb-e Wahdat's, Uzbek General Malik's and perhaps even al-Qaeda's, although it remains unknown if the terrorist organisation's tiny, helicopter-equipped 'air force' was actually separated from that of the Taliban.

Due to chaos and relatively little coverage of some areas of Afghanistan by not only journalists but also by scholars, it is possible that further research will reveal the existence of more short-lived air arms created by independent commanders or smaller political parties in the turmoil of the post-1992 period.⁸ However, distribution of major airports among the anti-Najibullah forces is well-known.

Battleground Kabul

After Hezb-e Islami forces were driven to the outskirts of Kabul by Massoud and Dostum in late April 1992, Hekmatyar resorted to indiscriminate shelling of the city with rockets and artillery – a practice that was to last with shorter or longer periods of calm for another three years, making large swathes of the capital totally devastated and barely habitable. While previous stages of the war had left Kabul largely intact, the fighting of the 1990s turned it into one of the most damaged cities in the world. While after the fall of Najibullah, the fighting in the Afghan countryside generally lost its intensity, the capital remained fiercely contested. For major players of the civil war,



A map of Afghanistan, showing approximate zones of control of various warlords and their parties. After 1992 Hezb-e Islami Khalis ceased to be a significant party to the ongoing Afghan conflict. (Map by Tom Cooper)

controlling Kabul was of a high symbolic value: the one who ruled the capital could claim the status of the Afghan government, even if such a government would control only a fraction of the whole country. Thus, even forces that in fact were regional in nature and could not expect to gain support throughout Afghanistan – like Shi'a Hezb-e Wahdat or Dostum's Uzbek-dominated organisation – invested enormous energy to be a part of the power struggle in Kabul with the aim of seizing important positions in whatever kind of government would eventually be established.

Kabul was hit by the first massive shelling on 10-11 May when about 1,000 rockets fired by Hezb-e Islami hit parts of the city, including 250 hits in the airport area. Being in constant danger of attack, Kabul International Airport soon lost its significance as an air base, although it remained a lifeline for Dostum's troops operating in the city. Trying to save the situation, the interim government of President Mojaddedi offered Hekmatyar the office of prime minister in late May but the agreement collapsed in less than a week after an Ariana Airlines Tu-154M carrying the president on a return trip to Pakistan came under fire seconds before landing at Kabul airport. The nose section of the airliner was shot off by either an RPG or a missile and the co-pilot suffered shrapnel injuries. The pilot, however, managed to land safely and none of the passengers were hurt. After this attempt on his life, Mojaddedi accused Hekmatyar and former Najibullah government agents of planning the attack, stressing that Hekmatyar had earlier threatened to shoot down his plane.⁹ Given the circumstances, it is no surprise that by the end of the month Massoud and Dostum, who were supporting the interim government, were again battling Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami south of Kabul. At the same time, in western neighbourhoods, Sunni Ittihad-e Islami started skirmishing with Shi'a Wahdat.

Meanwhile, Dostum's Harakat-e Shamal could already see that since the demise of the Najibullah government it was intentionally being excluded from the political process in Kabul. Although Dostum's contingent of troops was crucial in defending the new government against Hekmatyar, the Uzbek warlord's representatives were told that Harakat-e Shamal was not a political party and therefore it could not join the political discussion in the capital. In an effort to legitimise itself as a proper party in the eyes of mujahideen leaders in Kabul, Harakat was transformed on 1 June into Junbish-e Milli Islami (National Islamic Movement).¹⁰ In reality, its establishment would not change anything: neither Mojaddedi nor later Rabbani ever started any serious discussion with Junbish regarding the latter's role in the Afghan government, although both politicians relied on Junbish military forces in the fight against Hekmatyar.

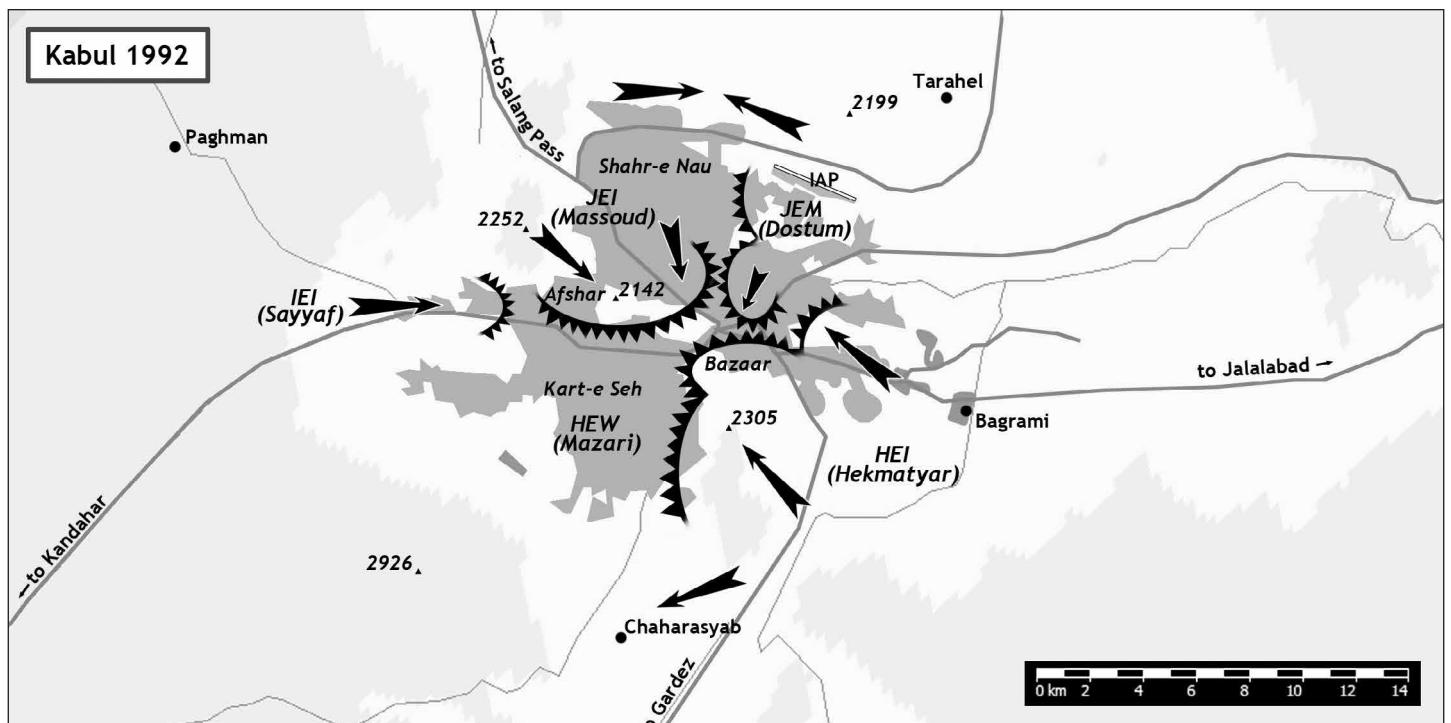
On 28 June, Mojaddedi was forced to step down by Burhanuddin Rabbani who took the president's office as had been arranged in the Peshawar Accords. For the first time since 1929, Afghanistan was led by a non-Pashtun – a development which resulted in the antagonism of some Pashtuns towards the new government. Indeed, while Rabbani enjoyed support of Shi'a Wahdat and Uzbek-dominated Junbish, the anti-Rabbani alliance was made up of two Pashtun parties: Pakistani-supported Hezb-e Islami and Saudi-supported Ittihad-e Islami.

Relentless fighting and absolute lack of security in the capital had many different consequences. One of them was withdrawal of foreign diplomatic staff back to home countries or the moving of diplomats to Mazar-e Sharif, which by that time was reasonably secure. In summer 1992, it was enough even for the Russian diplomatic mission: a plan was prepared according to which the Russian Air Force (Voyenno-Vozdushnye Sily [Rossii], VVS, officially renamed as such in May 1992), would evacuate the mission back to Russia by air. The dangerous operation began on 28 August when three Il-76s that

had been transferred to Kakaydi airfield in the ex-Soviet republic of Uzbekistan took off for Kabul. As they crossed into Afghan air space, Russian radar crews that were still serving in Uzbekistan detected a fighter jet that was closing on the leading Ilyushin. Moments later, two Russian MiG-29s were sent to investigate the situation but the Uzbek MoD did not allow them to cross the border. Fortunately, the chasing Afghan fighter jet changed its course and did not attempt to attack the transports; later it was revealed that the unknown jet was one of Dostum's MiG-21s that took off from Mazar-e Sharif, perhaps after local radar crew informed the airport of aircraft within Dostum's airspace. Immediately after the Il-76s landed at Kabul airport, Russian embassy staff and some other countries' diplomats began to board the planes. Shortly after – despite a two-hour ceasefire that had been agreed with the Afghan parties – rockets and mortar fire began hitting the area. While two Ilyushins managed to take off successfully, the third one – carrying registration RA-78780 – was hit by a shell and caught fire and all on board had to evacuate. One of the aircraft circling above the airport returned to pick up the passengers of the unlucky Ilyushin. Amid shelling, the aircraft successfully landed, picked up the frightened passengers and took off; the rest of the flight was reportedly uneventful.¹¹

The Rabbani government's insistence on excluding a 'communist' Junbish from the political process and Massoud's attempts to seize parts of Kabul dominated by Hezb-e Wahdat alienated these two key government allies to the point that as early as December 1992, Wahdat leader Abdul Ali Mazari signed a new alliance with Hekmatyar while Dostum practically ceased military support to the government and his position in the power-struggle became rather neutral. Creation of the Mazari-Hekmatyar alliance led Sunni Ittihad-e Islami – a fierce opponent of Shi'a Wahdat – to leave Hekmatyar's camp and join the Rabbani government instead.

After forming the alliance with the Shi'a party, Hekmatyar's rocket attacks intensified and even Wahdat forces began shelling northern Kabul from their positions in the western part of the city. In February 1993, Rabbani's government reacted with a military action called the Afshar Offensive, probably the largest military operation the capital witnessed since the first round of mujahideen infighting after the fall of Najibullah. The main objective of the operation in which Massoud's government forces directly cooperated with Ittihad militia was evicting Wahdat from Afshar district and adjacent areas and linking up government-held parts of the city to those controlled by Ittihad. The government also wanted to capture the political and military headquarters of Wahdat and capture Abdul Ali Mazari himself. The attack began on the morning of 11 February with artillery shelling after which the government forces and Ittihad militia moved from the west while another government unit fought its way to Afshar from the east. Around noon of the same day, it was evident that Wahdat could not withstand the onslaught. The Shi'a party's forces began retreating to safer areas in the west of the city, while Mazari and other Wahdat officials who still were at the party headquarters had to flee as well. In a matter of hours, it was clear that government and Ittihad forces achieved a complete victory: not only had they captured Hezb-e Wahdat HQ but also positions that the Shi'a party had used for shelling the government-held areas of Kabul. Although Wahdat still controlled large areas in western neighbourhoods, it lost some of the most important positions it had captured right after the fall of the Najibullah government. For the government, the outcome of the operation could not have been more favourable: after months of inconclusive skirmishing with Hezb-e Islami forces, the Massoud-Rabbani partnership was finally able to extend its grip on the capital.



A map of Kabul showing the advances of various warlords and their militias into the city in 1992. (Map by Tom Cooper)

To Dostum's aviators operating from Kabul airport, the latest rounds of fighting and the government victory brought absolutely no respite. Hekmatyar was still able to target the airport that, however, never truly closed. For Dostum, keeping Kabul International open provided the only option for delivering supplies to his troops in the capital. Indeed, the Uzbek general's Kabul contingent was sustained almost exclusively by transport aircraft. Facing the most difficult conditions, pilots were taking off and landing on damaged tarmac, hoping that they would not hit a piece of shell or other debris scattered over the airport. Shelling itself made the situation even more dangerous and take-offs and landings often had to be cancelled at the very last moment. While by the end of April 1992, the airport was full of Dostum's fighter jets and combat helicopters, a year later the site's most common visitors were An-12 and An-32 transport aircraft, as combat assets had either been transferred to the north or ended-up as piles of burned-out junk scattered all over the site. As already illustrated in the example of the ill-fated Russian Ilyushin, operating aircraft in a permanent warzone often resulted in dramatic situations. On one occasion, in February 1993, one of Dostum's An-12 (number 390) bound for Mazar-e Sharif was being loaded at Kabul airport while shells started to fall all around. The crew commander decided to take off immediately, even before the aircraft could be properly refuelled and its systems checked. Once the aircraft got close to Mazar, it was already dark. Unexpectedly – and to their horror – the crew found out that the runway lights of Mazar airport were turned off and, on the radio, there was no one responding to their calls. Apparently, as a result of non-existing coordination, no one was expecting their arrival. With their fuel tanks nearly empty, the crew decided to fly to the nearest airport, which was Termez just over the border in Uzbekistan. The problem was that none of the crew had ever landed there and they simply could not locate the local airport. Fortunately, after spending some time – and precious fuel – circling over the city, they noticed lights of an aircraft that was just taking off. This helped the pilot to finally locate the airport's runway and he began preparations for landing. Suddenly, just moments before the aircraft would have touched the ground, all four engines stopped running. The Antonov quickly lost height and ended its journey in a field in an emergency landing in which none of the crew or passengers



Two stills from a rare video showing one of Dostum's MiG-21bis. Although they seem to have regularly carried R-60 (AA-8 Aphid) missiles, Dostum's MiG-21s and Su-22s reportedly never scored any aerial victories against enemy aircraft. (For a reconstruction of this aircraft, see the colour section.) (Mark Lepko Collection)

were hurt. Uzbek authorities learned about what had happened only in the morning. One hundred bearded men with Kalashnikovs that were hanging around the aircraft were quickly loaded onto buses and transported over the border to Afghanistan while the crew was picked up a few days later by General Dostum himself.¹²

According to available reports, in the period of 1992 to 1993 the government air force did not perform any crucial combat action. Fighter jets and helicopters operating from Bagram occasionally

participated in fighting around Kabul and in December 1993, they made some bombing raids against Hekmatyar's units that were trying to break the government defences in the Tagab Valley close to Bagram, but their deployment never altered the course of any battle and they served more as a morale booster for Massoud and Dostum's troops than as a useful combat tool that could inflict serious damage on the enemy.

Other Frontlines

While the Afghan capital was being heavily contested, with entire neighbourhoods being turned into rubble, the rest of the country remained divided among various parties, warlords and local commanders. In many areas, the level of security increased and large-scale military operations were nearly ended. Indeed, many areas of the country enjoyed relative peace and, in comparison to the war in the 1980s, the number of casualties among both combatants and non-combatants dropped significantly. Probably the most disturbing factor that the fragmentation of the country brought about to peaceful regions were checkpoints manned by gunmen who collected 'taxes' from travellers and truck drivers, sometimes even robbing them of their belongings.

One of the few areas in the countryside that witnessed intense fighting – although still not comparable to that around Kabul – was Shindand. In August 1992, government fighter-bombers operating from Bagram attacked Shindand that was in Hezb-e Islami-affiliated ex-communist militia's hands. In October of the same year, when forces of Ismail Khan and Hezb-e Islami fought for control of this strategically important air base, Hezb-e Islami jets and helicopters entered the battle for the first time, conducting raids against Ismail Khan's formations in what was a rare occurrence of Hezb-e Islami actually using its air assets in combat.¹³ Khalqi pilots who sided with Hekmatyar bombed not only Herat airport that itself was a theatre of battles between Ismail Khan and Hezb units but one of them – Lieutenant Sakhi Jan – also performed a raid on Mazar-e Sharif airport, causing no damage. The pilot then did not return to Shindand but landed his Su-22 at Jalalabad in what might have been a defection or an effort to save a valuable aircraft for future action: by that time, Hezb-e Islami forces around Shindand were on the verge of defeat and it was clear that the air base that was being pounded by the government and Dostum's Sukhois would soon fall into Ismail Khan's hands. The eventual fate of the aircraft that landed at Jalalabad is not known: according to Pakistani press reports, the Eastern Shura that ruled Jalalabad and that took a neutral position in the Afghan conflict was reluctant to return the aircraft to its former owner, although after the fall of Shindand, Hekmatyar could not utilise the aircraft anyway.¹⁴

When Ismail Khan's forces occupied Shindand in the middle of October, they reportedly found the majority of fighter jets and transport aircraft destroyed, although several Su-17s and Su-22s and as many as 16 transport helicopters survived the air raids and were incorporated into Ismail Khan's fleet. The debacle at Shindand practically marked the end of the short-lived Hezb-e Islami air force as the party did not control any other major airfield and the only aircraft that still remained in its hands were a few helicopters stationed at various commanders' bases.

Meanwhile, the northern provinces under the influence of Abdul Rashid Dostum enjoyed a period of relative stability. Dostum's political party and his military, however, remained fragmented: while Dostum acted as a unifying figure, rallying many vassals around himself in the feudal system he had created, his own units were in control of a relatively small territory while the rest of the so called 'Dostum's north' was in fact ruled by many semi-independent commanders of not

only different ethnic origins but also of different party backgrounds. Tajik commander Atta Mohammad Nur of Jamiat-e Islami party – influential in Mazar-e Sharif – was especially a hypothetical challenger to Dostum, even if he gladly accepted all the financial and material aid that Dostum regularly provided.

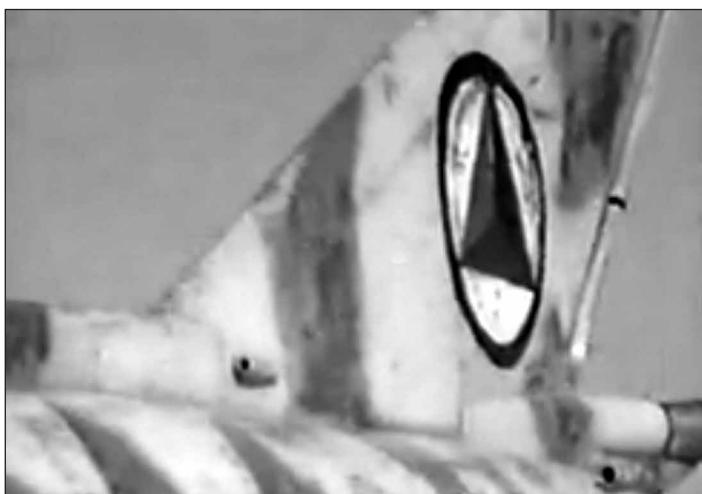
In 1993, a new air base was set up outside the northern town of Sheberghan. Dostum, knowing that his control of Mazar-e Sharif might be challenged by Hazara or Tajik elements within Junbish, apparently wanted to concentrate his strategic assets including the air force and Scud missiles in his home province of Jowzjan. Thus, in the provincial capital of Sheberghan, where Dostum had even built his luxurious palace, the air force headquarters was established and the local airport equipped with all that was needed for operating Dostum's fleet of fighter jets, although a number of machines still remained active at Mazar airport. Some SA-3 SAMs were transferred to Sheberghan as well although it is not known if any of these reached operational status at the new site.

In the first half of the 1990s, Dostum occasionally provided his Mi-17 helicopters to Hezb-e Wahdat, his primary ally. After the fall of Najibullah, Wahdat reportedly did not establish an air arm of its own and when its officials travelled to different parts of the country, they relied on Dostum's transport fleet.

Relatively poor maintenance of aircraft of all air forces in Afghanistan – and the flying of overloaded aircraft in sometimes forbiddingly bad weather – led to regular crashes in which many valuable assets and people's lives were lost. For example, General Naderi's small helicopter fleet suffered a loss in April 1993 when a Mi-17 carrying 15 passengers – including two American journalists – crashed in the Kayan Valley, killing all aboard. As the area of the crash was peaceful, the cause of the crash was probably a mechanical failure or pilot error.¹⁵ Similarly, a government Mi-17 with several high-ranking Jamiat commanders crashed shortly after taking off from Fayzabad airport in north-eastern Afghanistan; all passengers were killed. Another 76 passengers perished when one of Dostum's An-32s carrying a group of militiamen and a young sports team went down in the province of Samangan.

While use of aircraft around Kabul and in the north was commonplace, the south of the country saw a rapid decline of aviation. After April 1992, the city of Kandahar and the whole province were divided among several major commanders, many sub-commanders, and gangs of gunmen. While the transfer of authority from the communist regime to mujahideen groups had been planned to be a calm process, in reality it soon turned into a frenetic race for power in which mujahideen leaders from the countryside rushed into the city, trying to seize as much area and as many important installations as possible. New rulers, not much interested in political process but eager to make money, started to sell their newly acquired assets to whomever was willing to buy them. The airport was not spared from this sell-off either and some of its equipment also found buyers.¹⁶ This indicates that Haji Ahmad, the commander who seized the airport, apparently did not consider it a militarily valuable possession. Nevertheless, when in October 1992 two Khalqi pilots who were previously flying Hezb-e Islami aircraft at Shindand arrived in Kandahar, Haji Ahmad reportedly welcomed them with open arms: according to Pakistani journalists who toured the site, there were still nine MiG-21s and four Mi-8s in working condition present at the airport but Haji Ahmad lacked aircrews capable of utilizing his hardware.¹⁷ Whether the presence of pilots from Shindand actually made any difference remains unknown.

At some point in time, as factional warfare in Kandahar escalated, the airport was taken over by the most influential of all local leaders,



A small number of old MiG-21PFMs served with General Dostum's air force – alongside the more modern MiG-21bis and MiG-21UMs – into the 1990s. (For a reconstruction of this aircraft, serial number 350, see the colour section.) (Mark Lepko Collection)

Mulla Naqibullah Akhund. Several Mi-8 helicopters were at least occasionally flown, while the jets probably remained grounded as there are no reports of any airstrikes in the Kandahar area whatsoever, although fighting on the ground was very intense: while in 1992, a loose alliance of leaders called the Kandahar Shura was established to ensure a basic level of stability and distribution of power, a year later disputes over territory and power turned more violent and Kandahar became engulfed in a power struggle with the absolute absence of any central authority. Both the city and the province were fragmented into many personal fiefdoms of competing military commanders. Although the situation did not escalate to the levels known in Kabul, gun battles, lawlessness and roadblocks became commonplace.

Interestingly, the place where remnants of the communist Khalqi militias managed to survive for the longest was Helmand, a large province in southern Afghanistan covered mainly with desert that gradually transforms into high mountains in the province's northern areas. Here, former pro-government Khalqi militias led by Khano and Allah Noor controlled large swathes of land, while other parts of the province were ruled by mujahideen commanders and drug lords with whom the Khalqists were in an almost permanent state of war. Trying to strengthen their fragile position, Khano and Allah Noor allied with the Jamiat-e Islami-dominated Rabbani government and also maintained a friendly relationship with Dostum but eventually, in summer 1993, were defeated after their enemies had allied with the powerful Ismail Khan who was ironically also a member of Jamiat-e Islami and whose intervention changed the situation on the ground in favour of the anti-Khalqi forces. Both militia commanders were evacuated by one of Dostum's aircraft and flown to Mazar-e Sharif after they had lost much ground and their positions became untenable.

A still from a video showing one of Dostum's Su-22M-3s. Despite the poor quality it is possible to see a drop tank (painted in grey overall), an R-60 air-to-air missile, and either an RBK-250 CBU or a FAB-250M-62 bomb installed on the inboard underwing pylon. (Mark Lepko Collection)

In November 1993, a clash between Junbish and Hezb-e Islami forces occurred around the border town of Sher Khan Bandar on the bank of the Panj River in the northern province of Kunduz. Although on the national level the alliances were different, local Hezb-e Islami and Jamiat commanders agreed on a coordinated attack against Junbish with the aim of taking control of the important border crossing. Dostum's units were first forced to retreat from Sher Khan Bandar with three generals and dozens of troops fleeing to the Tajik side of the river, but counterattacked shortly after and recaptured some areas around the town. Eventually, Sher Khan Bandar was peacefully handed over to Junbish after intervention by President Rabbani, who was still an ally of Dostum on the national level and had some influence over local Jamiat commanders. From the military point of view, these events provide a good illustration of the ineffectiveness and problems Dostum's army had to deal with since the beginning of its establishment and also reveal why Dostum's numerically strong and technically well-equipped armed forces had such problems in fighting against Massoud and the Taliban in later stages of the war. In the area of Sher Khan Bandar, Dostum's regular army units totalling 300 men were commanded by no fewer than six generals including a political commissar and an intelligence officer.¹⁸ Irregular militia units of 860 men deployed by Dostum's vassals were led by four generals and one commander of a lower rank. Abdul Rauf Baigi, one of Dostum's top generals, was in charge of the whole force. Unsurprisingly, this gathering of armed men with no clear chain of command did not do particularly well, especially when the generals were busy elsewhere, focusing more on illicitly making money than on training and organising their forces.¹⁹

As Junbish forces were clashing over Sher Khan Bandar with their enemies, a rare incident took place over northern Afghanistan when radars of Dostum's air defence detected an object flying in an eastern direction and a MiG-21bis was immediately sent to investigate. Its pilot found out that the aircraft was an Iranian C-130 and forced it to land at Mazar-e Sharif airport. During subsequent inspection, boxes of ammunition were found in the cargo bay and the aircraft that was perhaps delivering ammunition to one of the anti-Dostum parties in Kunduz, was released only after the cargo was unloaded and confiscated. According to available information, interception of that unlucky C-130 was the only aerial victory that the Junbish air force ever achieved, despite its numerous actions against the Rabbani government and the Taliban in later years.

Dostum's Shift: The War of 1994

On 31 December 1993, Afghanistan witnessed yet another of the unexpected shifts of alliances, in many of which even the fiercest enemies became friends, only to turn against each other later. This

time, General Dostum supported by Shi'a Hezb-e Wahdat allied with fundamentalist Hekmatyar, forming an umbrella organisation called Shura-e Hamahangi (Council of Coordination) with the aim of defeating the Rabbani Government. The main cause of Dostum's switching sides was his fear that the rising power of Ahmad Shah Massoud could threaten his own position of Junbish ruler of the north.²⁰ The uneasy military alliance of Jamiat and Junbish thus broke up and new frontlines started to emerge not only in the capital, but also in northern and north-western Afghanistan, where the two so far relatively friendly forces turned enemies. For Dostum, his decision to join the anti-government camp and cooperate with Hekmatyar meant problems he had not faced before: as Junbish-e Milli comprised various semi-independent commanders and was multi-ethnic in nature, Tajik units as well as some high-ranking Tajik individuals in the Junbish military organisation tended to side with the predominantly Tajik Jamiat government. Within the Junbish air force, this led to many defections, cases of disobedience and the eventual decline of this service.

The first major defection of ground troops occurred immediately after Junbish's turn against the government when General Abdul Wahid Baba Jan, an ethnic Tajik, defected with his Kabul-based unit to Massoud's side, weakening Dostum's Kabul contingent of an estimated 5,000 troops at the very beginning of the offensive.²¹ Another defection followed after 5 January 1994, when General Abdul Momin, one of the highest figures in Dostum's military organisation, died in a mysterious helicopter crash that was widely blamed on Dostum.²² Momin, also an ethnic Tajik, fiercely opposed Dostum's alliance with Hekmatyar and he was considering switching sides to Massoud.²³ It is not known if the fatal helicopter crash was an accident, an act of sabotage, or was a shooting down, however, the machine piloted by Mohamad Farahi fell to the ground moments after performing a refuelling stop at Deh Dadi airfield outside Mazar-e Sharif. After Momin's death, his units based in the north around the town of Hairatan remained with Dostum, while his Kabul forces joined the Rabbani government.

Junbish and Hezb-e Islami militias launched their anti-government attack primarily in Kabul, trying to capitalise on the moment of surprise. However, things were not going as easily as Dostum and Hekmatyar might have hoped. Although they made some gains in the old city and got so close to the presidential palace that Rabbani decided to leave it, government units led by Ahmad Shah Massoud proved to be well motivated, equipped, and experienced not only to withstand this surprising attack, but also to eventually turn its tide and push their enemies out of their positions in later stages of the conflict. Moreover, Massoud's informants within Junbish leaked the information about the prepared offensive well in advance, enabling Massoud to prepare defensive lines.

Defections aside, one of the main reasons for Dostum's lack of success in Kabul was combat attrition of his units. After playing the essential role in preventing Hekmatyar taking Kabul in previous years, by the time of Dostum's anti-government turn they were just shadows of their former strength, partly due to corruption and carelessness of their commanders but also because in some of the units there had been hardly any recruiting: in 1994 in some military formations there were more officers than privates.²⁴ Thus, the most visible effect of the newly redrawn map of the frontlines in the capital was even more human suffering: due to the ferocious fighting around the city and rocket barrages fired by Hekmatyar from his base in Chahar Asiab, in the first half of 1994 at least tens of thousands were killed or wounded and many more decided to flee Kabul for safer areas.

In terms of air warfare, the fighting between the Government and Junbish saw one of the most intensive campaigns fought during the



Although a number of MiG-21UM two-seat conversion trainers with combat capability are confirmed to have served with Dostum's air force, no detailed information regarding their combat deployment is available. Known serials were 523, 0537, 547, 545, 0549, and 0557. (Mark Lepko Collection)

1990s civil war. Both sides were still relatively well-equipped and they did not hesitate to throw their air assets into combat. Indeed, the Junbish-Jamiat conflict was the first one in which the adversaries possessed real air warfare capabilities, the other two cases being the Taliban-Jamiat and the Taliban-Junbish campaigns fought in the second half of the 1990s.

The government air force started its operations against Dostum's contingent in the capital with bombing raids targeting Junbish positions around Kabul International Airport, prompting Dostum to react by launching attacks on Bagram airbase on 4 January. Although the bombardment was quite heavy, especially by the standards of the Afghan civil war, Bagram's damaged runway was repaired the very next day, allowing a pair of government MiG-21s to strike concentrations of Dostum's troops in Bala Hisar area of Kabul.²⁵

The threat of further air raids by Dostum served as an impulse for the government military to re-activate some of the air defence equipment inherited from the Najibullah regime. Although the air defence HQ was still functioning in Kabul, its actual activity after April 1992 was minimal as there was no internal or external air power to defend against and the radars and anti-aircraft weapons were practically left idle. Quite surprisingly, in only two weeks from the start of Dostum's offensive, the government was able to put back into service one P-37 early warning radar of the 210th Brigade in Bagram and several Bagram-based MiG-21bis were armed with air-to-air missiles – probably for the first time since the mujahideen takeover in 1992. Afghan

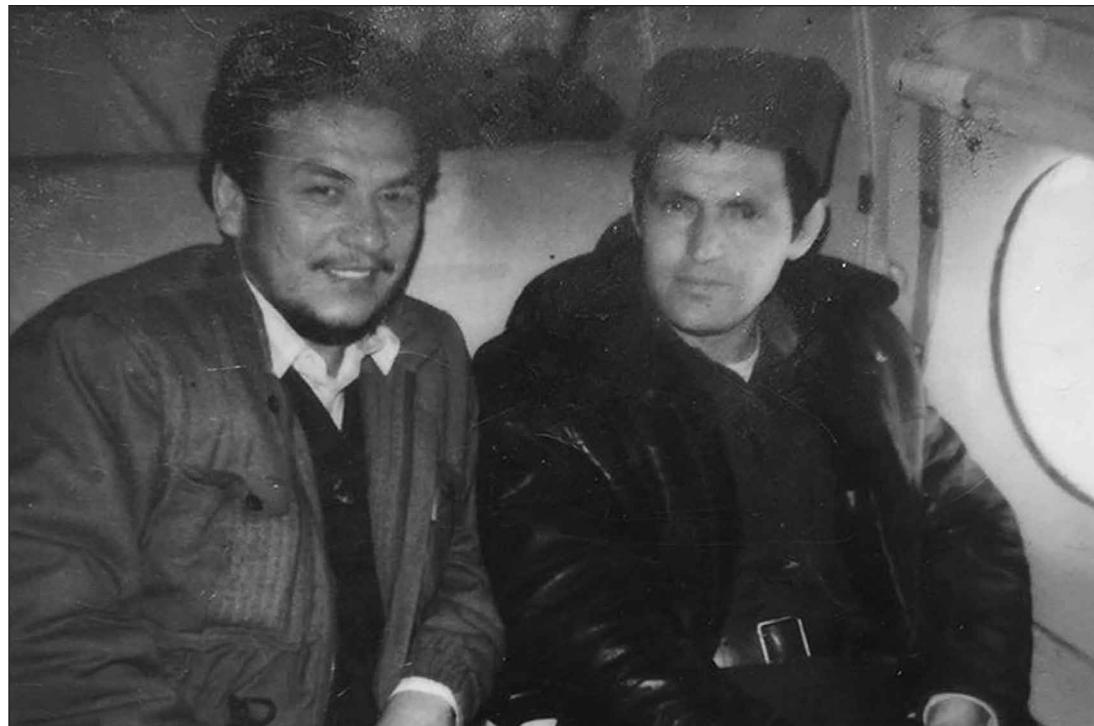
communist regime pilots had been trained in air combat during the 1980s and early 1990s to face the threat of Pakistani fighters and, in theory, they could still be able to perform interception of enemy aircraft. Some of the SA-3 missiles together with SNR-125 radars inherited from the communist regime were also re-activated and put on alert under the command of the Kabul-based Air Defence Regiment.²⁶

For Dostum's pilots, the consequences of these measures proved to be devastating. On 12 January, the Junbish air force lost two aircraft in action over Kabul: in the morning, a MiG-21bis manned by Abdul Ghafur fell victim to ground fire and, in the afternoon, a Su-22M4 piloted by Abdul Basir was lost to a government MiG-21bis. Both pilots ejected and were captured.

On 23 January, Junbish air force repeated the strike against Bagram, but during this attack, four pilots deserted, landing their aircraft on the undamaged runway. Later, three others landed at Shindand in western Afghanistan and also changed side.

Government air defences dealt another blow on 30 January, when one of Dostum's fighter-bombers (probably an Su-22) went down after being hit by an SA-3 over the town of Charikar, north of Kabul. Its pilot, General Rafik Mohammad Sarwar, safely ejected and was captured. On the same day, a government MiG-21bis manned by Shoaib Khan took off from Bagram airbase and while being guided from the ground, it successfully intercepted another of Dostum's Su-22s returning from a bombing raid over Kabul, taking it down with a K-13 air-to-air missile. The aircraft crashed in the province of Baghlan and its pilot, Dostum's air force chief General Mohammad Mustafa was killed. Thus, in a single day, Dostum's air force lost two senior airmen, including its highest commander.

Despite losses of jets, the Junbish air force still served as welcome support for Hezb-e Islami, delivering ammunition and supplies to its units in the province of Logar, south of Kabul, utilising a dirty airstrip located in this area as Kabul airport was simply too dangerous to use. However, deliveries of new ammunition only strengthened Hekmatyar's ability to proceed with indiscriminate shelling of Kabul.



General Abdul Momin (right) inside an aircraft. In January 1994, he perished in a helicopter crash widely blamed on Dostum. Momin's units stationed in Kabul then joined Massoud's forces and turned against Dostum. (via author)

In military terms this aid made no difference as neither Dostum nor Hekmatyar could penetrate through Massoud's defences in the capital.

Meanwhile in the north, a major power struggle developed in January in the province of Balkh and particularly in the provincial capital of Mazar-e Sharif. Here, Jamiat's regional top commander Atta Mohammad Nur, who had practically left Junbish already in 1993, began campaigning among former mujahideen military leaders against Dostum, hoping to gain control of the sacred city and shifting the balance of power in the north in favour of Jamiat-e Islami. However, Atta's attempt to challenge the Uzbek general failed miserably. Dostum was able to quickly gather a powerful force of an estimated 10,000 men and achieved a swift, decisive victory, forcing Atta to withdraw from Mazar-e Sharif completely.

After unsuccessful efforts to oust president Rabbani in Kabul, Dostum partially shifted his attention to the province of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan, making it a theatre of relentless battles through the whole 1994. Forces of Junbish and Hezb-e Islami on one side and Jamiat-e Islami supported by smaller parties on the other would clash mainly around the provincial capital of Kunduz and around small towns on the bank of the Panj River along the Tajik border. During battles for Kunduz, Dostum's air force flew intensive combat sorties supporting the offensive on the ground and also raided Bagram air base several times. In response, government jets made bombing raids on Mazar-e Sharif and Sheberghan, although results of these mutual attacks remain unknown. Over Kunduz, one of Dostum's Su-22s was shot down probably by anti-aircraft artillery and its pilot died in the crash.

In defiance of enemy attacks, the Afghan government decided to hold a military parade in the spring of 1994 in Kabul as a commemoration of the mujahideen victory over communism. Preparations for the event had been kept secret and there were no public announcements regarding the date and time until a few hours before the parade actually started. The government apparently feared that if Dostum or Hekmatyar had known that the parade would be organised, they would have tried to disrupt it, dealing a blow to government efforts to show that it had the situation in the capital



Some of the ex-AAF Su-17UM-2D two-seat conversion trainers with combat capability survived past 1992 and continued to serve with Massoud, Dostum and possibly other factions, including the Taliban. One of Dostum's Su-17UM-2Ds, serial number 080, visible here was operated from Mazar-e Sharif with no roundels: old markings were overpainted with dark green colour. (Mark Lepko Collection)

under control. Eventually, the event was successfully held on 3 May and Massoud's units displayed plenty of hardware, including SA-2, SA-3 and even SA-13 SAMs. The appearance of SA-13s especially was quite surprising since those systems had only occasionally been seen previously and their actual combat use in Afghanistan remains a mystery.

In May, the government air force succeeded in destroying one of Dostum's radars in the town of Pul-e Khumri north of the Salang Tunnel; lack of radar coverage complicated further operations of Junbish jets in eastern Afghanistan, including Kabul. On 9 May, government aircraft attacked the airfield in Mazar-e Sharif with uncertain results. Dostum's new air force commander General Abdul Jamil meanwhile stated that despite their losses, in May 1994 Junbish still had 32 operational planes, 100 pilots and 22,000 bombs.²⁷

During the first half of 1994, the military situation in Kabul was characterised more or less by a stalemate. Dostum's units were holding their positions but were not able to perform any decisive action, joining Hekmatyar in constant shelling of the city. The major change of situation came only at the end of June, when the government forces launched their carefully planned ground and air offensive that was to redraw the map of Kabul. The inability of Dostum's troops to effectively face the coordinated attack was soon evident: in a few days of fighting they lost not only Kabul International Airport but

also crucial positions on Marunjan hill and at Bala Hisar fortress which they used as a base for artillery attacks. Government ground operations were supported by MiG-21s and Su-22s from Bagram that performed the most intensive aerial bombardment Kabul had seen in more than 15 years of the Afghan civil war: during the Bala Hisar attack alone, government jets conducted at least 20 airstrikes.²⁸ Under the government pressure, some of Dostum's troops started to flee to safer areas, leaving behind ammunition, tanks and other equipment. Thus, within a few days Dostum's contingent in Kabul was practically defeated. In an apparent act of revenge for such a humiliation, Junbish fighter-bombers dropped eight bombs on the centre of the western city of Herat controlled by Ismail Khan, a government ally, killing and wounding civilians.²⁹

Despite the government's successful offensive in Kabul, the airlift of fresh soldiers from the north to an assembly point south of the capital did not stop, indicating Dostum's determination not to give up his hold on parts of the city he still controlled. Wearing down his best troops on Kabul's frontlines for the past two years, Dostum still wanted to play a central role in the Afghan political process and was not ready to confine himself within his northern provinces. The intensive airlift of troops by transport aircraft was not without accident though. On 29 June, an An-32 belonging to Dostum crashed in Logar province while carrying new recruits from Mazar-e Sharif. Of 70 people on board, only 20 survived. Just four days later, the Uzbek general suffered another loss of a transport aircraft in Logar when the sole An-24 operated by Junbish crashed with 50 soldiers onboard. Of note is that this aircraft formerly served with Ariana Airlines and after the mujahideen takeover, it had been left abandoned at Jalalabad airport where it was later noticed by Dostum's airmen. After they paid a bribe to the governor of Nangarhar province, the aircraft was brought back to airworthiness, flown to Mazar-e Sharif, and put to service within the Junbish air force.³⁰

On 18 July, government jets performed another large attack on Mazar-e Sharif airfield in which one of Dostum's aircraft was reportedly destroyed on the ground. The situation in Kabul was meanwhile rather stable: the government held much of the city while the western and southern areas were controlled by Dostum, Hezb-e Islami and Hezb-e Wahdat.

When the year was coming to its end, it was evident that for Dostum's air force it was an extremely unfortunate period. On the

one hand, pilots and ground crews were still able to keep the air force functional and when needed the number of sorties performed within a few days could reach dozens. On the other, combat losses and defections were crippling the service to such an extent that from 1995 onwards large air operations practically stopped and bombing raids were usually performed by single machines and their frequency went down. According to various sources, in 1994 Dostum's air force lost over 25 aircraft in crashes, due to enemy action, or defections. By contrast, Dostum's air defences reportedly shot down only one government aircraft. The



Ismail Khan (right) saluting in front of one of his An-32s. (Mark Lepko Collection)

contrast between the successes of government pilots and absolute lack of any aerial victory of Dostum's airmen is especially striking; both sides had the same aircraft types at their disposal, both had pilots trained at the same schools and both employed the same anti-aircraft missiles but Junbish pilots reportedly never scored a hit, and not only in the anti-government campaign in 1994 but during the entire civil war.

Probably the very last air combat between Jamiat and Junbish took place in June 1995 when a government MiG-21 shot down a Junkish Su-22 that was performing a bombing raid against targets in Khenj district in the Panjshir Valley.³¹

New Power from Kandahar

The precise circumstances in which the Taliban movement had been initially established are not entirely clear. The Taliban's own narrative says that the impulse for creating the movement was the everyday hardships faced by the population of Kandahar and its surroundings and the necessity to liberate the people from the rule of marauding commanders. On the contrary, some Western and Pakistani accounts notice the essential role of certain elements within the Pakistani administration in forming the movement. During 1994, it became clear to the interested Pakistani officials that their support for Hekmatyar was leading nowhere and that even the alliance of Hekmatyar with Dostum had failed to oust the Rabbani government. Thus, Pakistan needed a new, more capable force that could unite Afghanistan under a friendly regime. Some analysts suggest that it was the then Pakistani Interior Minister, retired Major-General Naseerullah Babar, who set up the process in which groups of religious students – talibs – who had been active in the area already in the 1980s were transformed into a coherent movement, even while the ISI was still supporting Hekmatyar.³² The truth may well never be determined though. What is sure is that the events on the ground started unfolding on 12 October 1994, when some 200 Taliban fighters stormed the border town of Spin Boldak in Kandahar province and after a short gun battle captured it from Hezb-e Islami. Diplomatic sources later claimed that Taliban fighters were supported by artillery fire from across the Pakistani border.³³ For bickering commanders in Kandahar city, the capture of Spin Boldak by a new force served as a warning. They accused Pakistan of supporting the new military formation, but failed to overcome their differences and did not set up a united front capable of facing the Taliban. On 2 November, a Pakistani convoy of trucks with consumer goods and medicine was stopped by the militia of commander Mansour Achakzai in Takht-e Pul, 35 kilometres from the city of Kandahar. After failed negotiations over the release of the trucks, the Taliban appeared on the scene. Their fighters quickly defeated Achakzai, freed the convoy and in a surprising move set off towards Kandahar. In just two days of fighting, the Taliban ousted or killed nearly all of the commanders that had misruled the second largest Afghan city over the past two years.

Rather surprisingly, the most numerous and best-equipped military force operating in Kandahar offered absolutely no resistance. Mulla Naqibullah Akhund, who commanded over 2,500 men of the 2nd Corps and who could possibly have prevented or at least severely complicated the Taliban's conquest of Kandahar actually handed over his weapons to the movement that at the time was much weaker than his force. There has been much speculation about the reasons leading Naqibullah to work with the Taliban: one theory suggests that this deal had been arranged by the Pakistanis and that Naqibullah was given a significant amount of money to defect from Jamiat-e Islami to the Taliban side.³⁴ When one of his sub-commanders informed president Rabbani about this deal, Rabbani reportedly told him

not to resist and to respect Naqibullah's decision.³⁵ As the Rabbani government was under constant pressure from Hekmatyar, Rabbani and Massoud might have considered the new movement a thorn in the side of their arch-enemy and might have wanted to bolster its ranks with manpower and weapons of their own ally. Some sources even say that Rabbani and Massoud initially supported the Taliban financially, unintentionally helping to grow their future enemy.

With Kandahar airport firmly in their hands, the Taliban got their first aircraft. Precise information on numbers, types, and overall conditions at the airport remain unknown however. Different sources say that the Taliban inherited six (some say eight or even 15) intact MiG-21s and four (some say six or 10) transport helicopters, although there certainly were far more aircraft in unrepairable condition available for spare parts.³⁶ Two other Mi-8 or 17 helicopters were taken from the base of Hezb-e Islami commander Sarkateb in Bagh-e Pul west of Kandahar city.³⁷ It is unclear if there were also any transport aircraft based at Kandahar airport at that time, but it is highly likely. Thus, the total number of aircraft captured by the Taliban could have been higher than usually reported. Of all captured MiGs, only one was airworthy and it was reportedly used in combat for the first time only in April 1995.³⁸

Unlike Mulla Naqibullah, the Taliban intended to build a functional air force and soon after capturing Kandahar the movement started to address problems with the lack of pilots, ground crews, and fuel. Details of Taliban activities in this regard remain unknown, but reports say that the Taliban was looking for former Afghan regime pilots in Pakistan, where many of them had found a new home after emigrating from their war-torn homeland.

Asserting authority over Kandahar province, the Taliban quickly seized Uruzgan and Zabul provinces in a campaign that saw almost no bullets fired. Local commanders either switched sides after negotiations with Taliban envoys who stressed that the movement aimed to bring peace and security or were bribed with cash. The province of Helmand to the west proved to be a harder nut to crack though. Its governor, notorious drug lord Ghaffar Akhunzada refused to lay down his weapons and fighting raged into January 1995 with casualties in the hundreds. Eventually, however, the Taliban prevailed and forced the remnants of Akhunzada's militia to flee to the mountainous province of Ghor in central Afghanistan where they later joined the forces of Ismail Khan. After defeating two local commanders, the Taliban proceeded further to the west and by late January 1995, it captured the town of Delaram, reaching the unofficial border of Ismail Khan's fiefdom. The Taliban's campaign was not contained to the west though. At the same time, the Islamic movement was making steps leading to its expansion into eastern provinces in the so-called Pashtun belt. Unlike the nearly peaceful conquest of Uruzgan and Zabul, the Taliban's advance to the province of Ghazni and further north and east was more violent. Although the movement still proclaimed that its campaign was motivated by the noble intentions of putting an end to lawlessness and anarchy, the fact was that the overall situation in those provinces was peaceful and could not have been compared to the chaotic Kandahar. Still, the Taliban was determined to impose its rule. Using a tactic that was nearly the same as weeks before in Uruzgan and Zabul, the Taliban either persuaded local rulers to surrender or, when negotiation with a particular commander was more problematic, offered him a sum of money or resorted to violent means.

As far as it is known, during its swift advances of late 1994 and early 1995, neither the Taliban nor any of its opponents in the south used airpower in the fighting. It is highly likely, though, that the Taliban soon started employing at least a few of the helicopters captured during the Kandahar campaign for transportation duties.



This Bagram-based An-12 (serial number 405) of Jamiat-e Islami carried unique insignia consisting of a roundel in green-white-black and white. (Photos by Santiago Flores)

Indeed, the de-facto establishment of the Taliban air force did not take long to come about. Taliban efforts in recruiting former communist regime officers apparently brought some success, thanks to which the movement began to operate not only tanks and other advanced ground equipment, but also captured aircraft. For some Pashtun Khalqis, and Pashtun followers of the Parcham faction, the Taliban's call to arms represented an invitation they gladly accepted.³⁹ Already in late 1994, a UN representative who was visiting Kandahar met a former communist pilot who stated that he and many of his colleagues were now flying for the Taliban.⁴⁰ Once again, it was clear that in post-1980s Afghanistan ethnic identity became more important than one's previous political allegiance. The incompatibility of ex-communist officers with their mullah superiors created a certain level of friction that in subsequent years forced some former communist regime specialists to leave the radical movement.⁴¹ Another reason for joining the Taliban could have been the hatred of some pilots towards mujahideen parties who were continually destroying the country instead of bringing peace. No matter the reasons, former Pashtun Khalqi officers – and later even some Tajik and Uzbek defectors from Massoud and Dostum – continued to serve in the Taliban ranks as mechanics, pilots, tank crews, and radar and communication specialists, significantly boosting the movement's combat capabilities up until its defeat by the US-led coalition in late 2001.

Clash with the Government: the Taliban's First Defeat

Heading north-east in the direction of Kabul, it had not taken long for the Taliban to encounter one of the most notorious players of the Afghan civil war – the 'core' forces of Hezb-e Islami. A prelude to the clash was an attack by Hezb-e Islami on Qari Baba, an ally of Rabbani

who served as the governor of Ghazni province. Relatively strong and popular, Qari Baba had refused to surrender to the Taliban when they initially approached him, however, after the Hezb offensive, he was caught in a desperate situation and decided to join forces with the fundamentalist movement. As a result, Hezb-e Islami's attack was not only stopped, but the party's forces were pushed back to the north into Wardak province, their home territory. Here, the Taliban onslaught started on 30 January 1995 and after heavy fighting with hundreds of casualties the Taliban militia overran the provincial capital of Maidan Shahr on 10 February. In a swift operation they even captured the town of Puli Alam, the capital of Logar province, on 13 February. During the fighting, Taliban units on the ground were supported by Government jets that hit Hezb-e Islami targets multiple times. Suddenly, Hezb-e Islami's most important base at Chahar Asiab outside Kabul found itself squeezed between Massoud's defenders of Kabul to the north and the Taliban to the west and south. In this situation, many Hezb-e Islami fighters, and even some of the party's commanders, switched sides and joined the Taliban that was ideologically close to the fundamentalist Hekmatyar party but had one important advantage: the radical movement appeared to be winning their campaign. Back in the mid-1990s, after their immense success in the south, the Taliban had an aura of invincibility and many fighters from Hezb-e Islami – and perhaps even other groups – believed that Taliban members had some sort of a divine protection.⁴² Thus, for many, switching sides seemed the best possible option.

After a series of defeats and considering his position untenable, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar hastily retreated to the town of Sarobi east of Kabul, leaving behind a significant amount of ammunition and hardware, including BM-22 Uragan long-range MLRS, one Mi-24 – although severely damaged – and at least two Mi-17 helicopters. It was clear now that the Taliban had had more ambitious goals in sight than just making peace in a handful of Pashtun provinces: indeed, in a matter of three months the movement transformed from a rag-tag band of fighters into one of the most capable forces of the Afghan civil war. In terms of manpower and armour, the Taliban's advances and coopting of local commanders were making it steadily stronger and more self-confident. In February 1995 its strength numbered in the thousands and its mechanised force, no matter its primitive use, counted over 100 operational tanks, IFVs, and APCs.

As the Taliban were nearing Kabul, the Rabbani government was trying to present the movement as its ally in the fight against Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami, although the Taliban fiercely denied it, stressing that their forces were in fact neutral and would not cooperate with any of the mujahideen parties which – according to them – were all equally bad. However, it is important to note that after Hekmatyar's defeat, when the Rabbani government and the Taliban met face-to-face for the first time, their relationship, although complicated and tense, was not outright hostile. The conciliatory attitude of the government towards the Taliban can be illustrated by the government's willingness to cede Chahar Asiab base, which the government troops had promptly occupied after Hekmatyar's withdrawal, to the Islamic movement. Journalists present at the site also noted Massoud's technicians from Bagram repairing at least one of the captured Mi-17 helicopters for the Taliban.⁴³

Meanwhile in Kabul, Hekmatyar's defeat relieved the pressure on government units, giving Ahmad Shah Massoud the capacity to execute an operation aimed at cleaning the capital of other forces that were contesting the government's authority over the city. Remnants of Dostum's contingent were still present in a small enclave southwest of Kabul, while the Shi'ite Hezb-e Wahdat controlled the western suburbs. Rather unexpectedly, Massoud's offensive was to develop

into a fight that not only brought Kabul under total government control, but also finished the fragile peace between the government and the Taliban, inflicting a serious defeat on the so far invincible Islamic movement. Things started unfolding when Massoud's units attacked positions of Hezb-e Wahdat. Its leader Abdul Ali Mazari had been negotiating with the Taliban for some time already, and after the government onslaught he openly asked the Taliban for help. Under the resulting agreement, the Taliban should have come in between Wahdat and Massoud's troops, taken control of the Shi'a party's heavy weapons positioned on the frontline and served as a neutral buffer force. Not everyone was happy about the deal though. When the Taliban troops reached Wahdat units on the frontline with the aim of taking over their weapons, the units in question opened fire on the Taliban as large groups of Wahdat fighters joined a splinter faction of the party that was affiliated with the government and was in conflict with Mazari.⁴⁴ Anthony Davis, a journalist who spent years covering the war in Afghanistan gives this description of the following events:

Whether Massoud did actually agree to the Taliban moving into southwest Kabul remains a moot point. But whatever the Taliban may have believed, he had no intention of permitting them to remain. Having pushed one enemy to the wall, he was not about to allow another to step in as a 'neutral' force and pursue its stated goal of ruling in Kabul. After a brief lull, he struck again on the late morning of Saturday 11 March in an offensive that unleashed the full panoply of government military might. With blocking points at the Soviet and Polish embassies now turned by the Wahdat defectors, government armour punched down the main axis of Darulaman Avenue as Mi-35 helicopter gunships and Su-22 jets provided close air support. Wild retaliatory rocket barrages on the city centre from both the Taliban and Wahdat meanwhile inflicted scores of casualties. By late afternoon however, government troops had pushed south to the battered shell of the Darulaman Palace on the city's outer edge and, amid considerable looting of Shiite quarters, were mopping up the resistance behind them.⁴⁵

Massoud, determined to exploit his achievements, proceeded in the onslaught and in the next few days his forces evicted the Taliban from Chahar Asiab, occupied the military base of Rishikor south of Kabul and pushed the enemies further west and south from the capital. Massoud also captured the Scud missile base near Darulaman that had been controlled by his enemies since 1992. For the first time in years, Kabul was out of firing range of hostile forces' weapons.

Abdul Ali Mazari, leader of Hezb-e Wahdat, was not able to convince the Taliban that the attack of some of his men against the Taliban's 'buffer force' had been a genuine, unexpected rebellion. The Taliban accused Mazari of treason, managed to catch him and was about to take him by helicopter to Kandahar. However, Mazari together with his close aides were killed under uncertain circumstances on the way before the helicopter had reached its destination. This incident made any future entente between the Taliban and Afghan Shi'a virtually impossible: Hezb-e Wahdat elected a new leader, Karim Khalili, who after some initial flirting with the radical movement fought it fiercely until the movement's defeat in late 2001.

The unexpected developments on the Kabul frontlines also marked the end of Dostum's presence in this part of the country. The Uzbek general's forces, still occupying a pocket near Kabul, were all disarmed by the Taliban after a mutual agreement and evacuated to Mazar-e-Sharif using available road connections; an additional 300 men who were taken by the Taliban to Kandahar were later flown out by Dostum's Antonovs.

The Fall of Ismail Khan's Emirate

In the period of the Taliban's defeat at the gates of Kabul, the movement was making lightning progress in the west. Despite warnings from their supporters within the Pakistani ISI that the movement was not prepared for such an ambitious enterprise, Taliban leaders decided to launch an attack on Ismail Khan with the bold aim of taking Herat. Initially, everything went well as Ismail Khan's local Pashtun allies in Nimruz and Farah provinces – many of which actually disliked Khan's manners – either fled or joined the advancing Taliban. By the end of March, the Taliban was closing on Shindand AB after making a rapid advance along the highway connecting Kandahar in the south with Herat in the north-west.

At the same time, Ismail Khan's commanders were facing an escalation of fighting in Badghis province on the border with Dostum's fiefdom in the north. Here, units led by Dostum's General Rasul Pahlawan – Ismail Khan's arch-enemy – launched an offensive that, albeit not being as threatening as the Taliban's blitzkrieg in the south, still had to be taken seriously, especially after Pahlawan, helped by local Ismail Khan's enemies, had captured the important town of Bala Murghab.

Being under pressure from two sides, Ismail Khan turned to Kabul for assistance. The official Afghan government military led by Ahmad Shah Massoud reacted swiftly and organised an air bridge the scale of which was unprecedented in the post-Najibullah era. Utilizing not only military Antonov transport aircraft but also Ariana passenger jets, in a matter of days the government airlifted 1,000-2,500 troops (depending on the source) from Kabul to Herat.⁴⁶ They proved to be a welcome support for Khan's badly beaten units that had not been able to stop the Taliban advance until the movement got to the vicinity of Shindand where a stable frontline could have finally been established.

Eventually, fighting near Shindand marked a turning point of this campaign. In early April, Ismail Khan's forces together with Massoud's seasoned fighters pushed the Taliban some 30 kilometres back from the air base where the two sides fought a days-long merciless battle that saw probably the heaviest fighting since the 1989 Jalalabad offensive.⁴⁷ In the fighting that involved over 6,000 troops, casualties on both sides went into the hundreds. During the battle, the Islamic movement faced intensive air attacks they were not able to defend against: evidence that the Taliban, although being able to deploy helicopters almost immediately following the capture of Kandahar, were still not capable of challenging the enemy's jets six months later. Air power of either the government or Ismail Khan's air force – it is not clear if the massive air attacks were conducted by just one of these air arms or both of them – eventually contributed to breaking the Taliban's will to fight.

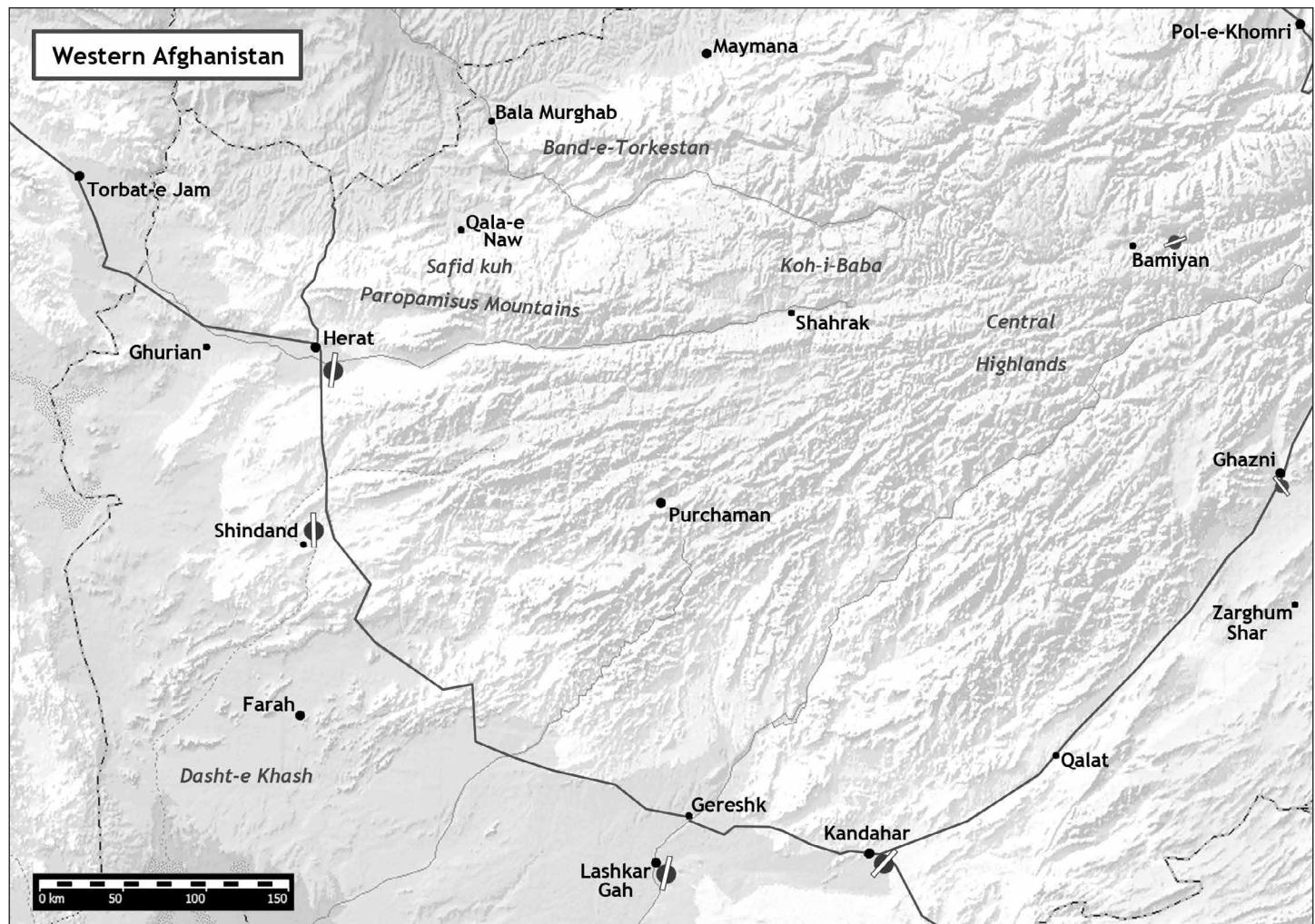
According to Pakistani press reports, a single Taliban jet flew combat sorties in April 1995 in western Afghanistan as well, but its actions could not save the situation and by the end of the month, demoralised and insufficiently supplied Taliban militiamen withdrew from the battlefield, fleeing back to south. In the ensuing battle of 28-29 April, the Taliban allegedly lost another 200 men and were not only evicted from their positions in the province of Farah but also forced back to the highway town of Delaram, from which they had launched their ill-fated offensive weeks earlier.⁴⁸ Consolidating his gains, Ismail Khan was apparently satisfied with the progress his and Massoud's forces had made and restrained from any attempts to chase the Taliban further south. The rout was such that many observers predicted the Taliban's demise but as history shows, they were utterly wrong.

The summer months were characterised by a relative calm. However, the Taliban were far from inactive: on the contrary, they shifted their focus towards making their army better trained and

better equipped for further advances. Perhaps most importantly, the Taliban acquired – or was given by Pakistan – hundreds of Toyota pick-up trucks that bolstered the student militia's already remarkable capacity for quick movement over the southern deserts. In a bid to boost manpower, new volunteers from across the Pakistani border, as well as from conquered provinces inside Afghanistan, were accepted into the ranks of the Taliban. Thanks to Pakistani assistance, in a matter of a few months the Taliban was prepared to challenge Ismail Khan again.

Meanwhile, the Emir of Herat was apparently making no steps to address the problems within his military – a mistake that, in the coming months, was to cost him nothing less than his very 'Emirate'. First of all, Ismail Khan's attitude to building an army had been different to what other prominent Afghan leaders considered appropriate. Since the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s, he had been showing a strong appetite for centralising power within his own hands, treating other commanders as mere subordinates and not allowing them much space for their own initiative. This was in stark contrast to Dostum, whose power had emerged from a network of relatively independent vassals whom the General treated as equals. Although Ismail Khan had created a military organisation the stable core of which – at least superficially – resembled a regular army, its real capabilities were modest. Disgruntled and critical commanders aside, among the primary reasons of its weakness was the very nature of Khan's military system that was based on conscription. After Najibullah's defeat in 1992, Ismail Khan did not abolish this unpopular practice and proceeded to fill his units with reluctant young men that were ill-motivated and not particularly willing to fight.

In August 1995, Ismail Khan made the ominous decision to launch an all-out attack on the Taliban forces in Delaram. Apparently, for the unsuspecting Taliban the attack was a genuine surprise and they lost the highway city on 23 August, leaving behind a quantity of armour. Ismail Khan, aided by commanders from Kandahar and Helmand who had been forced to flee by the Taliban some months earlier, did not stop in Delaram and pushed further south, successfully forcing the Taliban from their positions but also overstretching his own supply lines in the process. The Taliban were fleeing. Forces led by the Emir of Herat even captured Musa Qala in Helmand and got close to the town of Girishk on the border of Kandahar province, threatening the core area of the Taliban. However, what might have seemed as an absolute success was in fact an inadequately prepared enterprise. Due to dysfunctional logistics, men in Khan's victorious units were hungry, which together with the inherent lack of motivation only contributed to their indifference. When the Taliban successfully ambushed a leading convoy near Girishk, killing scores of troops, Ismail Khan, who was personally present in the area, ordered a general retreat.⁴⁹ At that moment, his military started crumbling. As fast as it had raced to the south, it was chased by the Taliban back north. Some sources say that the Taliban's ranks were bolstered by a high number of fresh volunteers from madrassa students from Pakistan who rapidly crossed the border with the direct support of ISI when the very existence of the radical Islamic movement seemed to be threatened by Khan's blistering offensive. Thus, Ismail Khan's units were suddenly facing a fast-moving Taliban that were attacking not only along the highway, but also on the flanks, using their 4x4 pick-up trucks in a mobile warfare Khan's men were not accustomed to. Parts of Khan's



A map of western Afghanistan showing the four primary airfields in this area. (Map by Tom Cooper)

units even found themselves cut off from the main forces which only intensified the panic among troops. On 29 August, the Taliban recaptured Delaram and continued pushing their disorganised enemy towards Shindand. Here, the Emir of Herat was trying to set up a line of defence, but it was too late and the army was in disarray: when a senior figure arrived from Kabul to assess the situation, he saw troops who had not eaten for 36 hours and had shortages of drinking water due to a total collapse of the logistical system.⁵⁰ Moreover, the position of Ismail Kahn among his commanders was ever more difficult. Allied leaders from Helmand and Kandahar started to be openly critical towards him and his real capacity by this time to control his own units was almost non-existent.

Maybe it was caused by relentlessly attacking Taliban forces, maybe by his personal exhaustion that Khan suddenly made an unexpected decision: in the early morning of 3 September, he ordered a retreat from Shindand in the direction towards Herat. This was the final nail in the coffin of his 'Emirate'. Although commanders from Helmand and Kandahar strongly opposed Khan's decision, disorganised units of Khan's army began to flee north both in vehicles and on foot, abandoning the air base without a fight.

It is certain that some of the aircraft stationed at Shindand were flown to Herat at the very last moment but nothing is known about any combat sorties conducted by Khan's jets in these final days of the campaign. Various sources claim that the Taliban found as many as 40 Sukhoi fighter jets, transports, and helicopters at Shindand and that at least some of them were pressed into service with the Islamic movement's air force. However, as Shindand AB had suffered some damage already in October 1992 when Ismail Khan wrestled it from Hezb-e Islami, the actual number of serviceable aircraft at the base at the time of the Taliban takeover might have been much lower, especially as some air assets were evacuated to Herat. No matter the conflicting reports, the Taliban air force started using at least a few Su-17s and Su-22s shortly after capturing Ismail Khan's airports.

By the time of their retreat from Shindand, Khan's units had lost even the last traces of the ability to oppose the Taliban as a coherent fighting force. If their leader had hoped that there might have been a chance to stop the Taliban just outside Herat, it was now apparent that he had been wrong. In the early hours of 5 September, Ismail Khan, with several hundreds of his men set off towards the border town of Islam Qala and crossed to Iran, leaving much of his disorganised army behind. Communication among commanders was so poor that some of them were not even informed about Khan's decision to flee and did not know that the fight for the western capital was practically over. When the Taliban arrived in Herat on 5 September, however, there was nobody in the city who would have stood in their way. Hundreds of Ismail Khan's men were taken prisoner and the Taliban captured some more aircraft at the local airport.

A day before the Taliban's conquest of Herat, General Dostum had ordered an aerial attack on the headquarters of the 17th Division of Ismail Khan's army as well as on Herat airport. The result of these attacks remain unknown, although the coordination with the Taliban shows that at that time, Dostum and the Islamic movement were cooperating to some degree. Apart from a natural effort to inflict as much damage as possible on their common enemy, the other factor playing an important role in building this informal alliance were Pakistani envoys that had been very active in northern Afghanistan, doing their best to keep Dostum in the anti-Jamiat camp. Thus, the Uzbek general's jets were not only active over the western battlefields but also performed occasional bombing raids against the government targets around Kabul. For example, on 29 August Dostum's Sukhois targeted Bagram AB. The Uzbek general's spokesman later stated

that three government jets were destroyed in the raid, although this success remains unconfirmed.

After securing Herat, the Taliban again shifted its attention to Kabul. However, Massoud's forces were much more professional, well supplied and their morale was high. The Taliban could not do much until one of the government commanders who was holding a stretch of frontline switched sides, apparently after being bribed by the Taliban. As a result, in October 1995 the Taliban recaptured the important base of Chahar Asiab south of Kabul. On 10 October, the movement's air force conducted the first aerial attack against government positions near the capital and twelve days later it attacked Kabul itself when two Su-22s that had been captured from Ismail Khan dropped bombs over a huge fuel storage site but missed.⁵¹ During subsequent weeks, the Islamic movement launched several desperate attempts to gain more ground near the capital, but these were all repulsed by Massoud. Embarrassed by their lack of success, the Taliban resorted to the same violent practice that had been employed by Hekmatyar and on 10-11 November made Kabul a target for heavy shelling that killed dozens of civilians. Also, on 10 November, three Taliban jets dropped bombs on Bagram AB, reportedly causing no damage.

The movement launched its heaviest frontline attack on 16 November, pushing from the east and even threatening the Kabul-Jalalabad highway. The Taliban was making advances until the government forces stabilised the situation and conducted their counter-attack twelve days later. This action, in which the government deployed its Su-22s and MiG-21s, forced the Taliban back to the area from where they had started their offensive, reversing any gains that the movement had made. On 22 December, the Taliban claimed that their anti-aircraft artillery shot down one government fighter jet near Kolangar south of Kabul; government sources stated that the aircraft crashed due to technical reasons.⁵² The Taliban air force was also very active, but was suffering considerable losses: on 16 October, according to unconfirmed reports Masood's fighters downed three MiG-21s and an Mi-8 over Maidan Shahr during a single action, using either SA-7 or Stinger MANPADS.⁵³ On 31 October a MiG-21 was shot down over Kabul. Finally, on 12 November two Taliban Mi-8s were shot down or crashed due to technical reasons: one of them carried Mullah Mohammad Omar, but he survived. According to reports, the Taliban's employment of transport helicopters in fighting around the capital was extensive, their primary task being evacuation of wounded and dead from the frontlines to safe bases behind the frontline.

For the rest of the winter, Kabul remained relatively quiet. The Taliban had allegedly lost hundreds of casualties and were too exhausted to make any further attempts for the capital. Government forces were ready to defend Kabul but they did nothing to recapture the land south and west of the capital that the Taliban had seized in the October offensive.

Airstan Incident: Taliban Air Force Showing its Teeth

In summer 1995, Taliban leader Mohammad Omar appointed the first commander of Kandahar airport, giving this position to a new Taliban member, Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. This former mujahideen guerrilla fighter and religious student who had just returned from Peshawar in Pakistan did not have any previous relationship with aviation – an obstacle which did not prevent him from becoming very active in this area and holding various aviation-related posts within the Taliban administration in the subsequent years. Assuming command of Kandahar airport, he de facto became the first commander of the Taliban's air and air defence force, or more precisely, of the Taliban's group of men operating aircraft and anti-aircraft weapons.⁵⁴

Sometime in the first half of 1995, Pakistani ISI helped broker a rather unexpected agreement between the Taliban and General Dostum. Under the deal, Dostum's mechanics arrived in Kandahar via Peshawar and Quetta in July and repaired some of the aircraft and helicopters that the Taliban had captured in the past year.⁵⁵ Dostum's mechanics did their job right: according to a Taliban spokesman, in summer 1995 the movement had eight operational jets ready for action.⁵⁶ There was even enough aircraft fuel in underground storage tanks at Kandahar airport as little flying had occurred during the years before the Taliban came.

Indeed, on 3 August a Taliban MiG – some sources say two MiGs – intercepted a civilian Ilyushin Il-76 transport aircraft and forced it to land at Kandahar airport, causing a widely reported upon international incident. The Ilyushin was operated by the Airstan company registered in Russia and leased to Rus Trans Avia Export, a company that was based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, and owned by a Russian arms dealer Victor Bout who was doing business with the Rabbani government. After opening the cargo bay, it was evident that the Ilyushin manned by a Russian crew of seven was a big catch: its cargo consisted of 30 tons of weapons from Albania intended for the Rabbani defence minister, Ahmad Shah Massoud. The Taliban promptly stated that they would not allow the aircraft or the crew back: the seven men were imprisoned at Kandahar airport and the aircraft was left idle – although not damaged – on the tarmac.

While Victor Bout, his brother Sergey and the Russian foreign ministry were trying to secure the release of the Russian pilots, Bout's companies started operating cargo flights to Kandahar as a gesture of goodwill that Bout hoped would soften the Taliban stance. On board these flights were electronics, clothes and other consumer goods for the Taliban and Victor Bout soon turned this 'goodwill' into a profitable business, with the number of daily flights sometimes reaching as many as six.⁵⁷ Ironically, what started as an embarrassing international incident ended up as the beginning of an improbable cooperation between a radical Islamic movement and an opportunistic Russian entrepreneur, who at the same time continued doing business with the Rabbani government as if nothing had happened.

As the talks about the release of the aircraft and crew were ongoing, the Taliban air force scored another successful interception in September of the same year when one of its MiGs forced another

civilian plane to land, this time an Ariana Boeing 727 en route from the Emirates to Jalalabad. This indicates that the Taliban had either made some of the ex-communist air defence radars at Kandahar operational or that the movement's jets were performing regular patrol flights, or both. As the Boeing was carrying commercial goods, it was cleared for take-off shortly after inspection and allowed to continue its journey.

After some time and more rounds of talks that even involved American senator Hank Brown, the Taliban allowed the captured crew, who had meanwhile grown long beards and were suffering from poor food and the overall primitive conditions at their jail, to regularly perform maintenance checks on the aircraft. The Russian side reportedly offered the Taliban a shipment of spare parts for helicopters in exchange for releasing the crew but the Taliban rejected the proposal. Thus, months slowly went by, the crew were doing regular maintenance, and talks were in a stalemate. After 378 days of captivity, on 16 August 1996, half of the guards who were normally present during maintenance left the crew for afternoon prayers. The Russians seized the opportunity and started one of the aircraft's four engines with an auxiliary power unit, disarmed and bound the guards and, using the power of the running engine, started the remaining three. Fuel was no issue: there was enough of it in the plane's tanks for the originally planned flight to Kabul and back to the Emirate of Sharjah. As the huge transport aircraft was readying for take-off, a group of Talibas tried to block the runway with a ZIL firefighting truck but the pilot, Vladimir Sharpatov, managed to take to the air before the aircraft would have struck the obstacle. The crew immediately headed out of Afghan airspace and took a course via Iran to Sharjah: the danger of being again intercepted by a Taliban MiG was high, although according to available information, none was actually sent to the air.

In the months and years after these events, rumours emerged that the Taliban – after some secret agreement with Bout, Russia or other party – intentionally let the crew regain control of the aircraft and escape in exchange for shipments of some valuable cargo. Although the truth may never be determined, the decision to use the opportunity to escape probably was a genuine action on the part of the crew who took a great risk of being killed or wounded; we can only speculate about the reasons why some of the guards left and why no jet took off to chase the aircraft.

4

THE TALIBAN'S CONQUEST OF THE NORTH, 1996–1998

In January 1996, frontlines around Kabul were stable with no side planning for any decisive action. In reaction to their inability to break the defences of Kabul, the Taliban proceeded in randomly shelling the capital, mostly killing civilians. The difference between their stated moral standards and reality could not be more obvious: while in the beginning of its existence the movement was proclaiming that it would protect the civilian population against ruthless commanders and would never target non-combatants, by 1996 its disregard for the loss of lives in Kabul matched that of infamous mujahideen and ex-communist militia leaders.

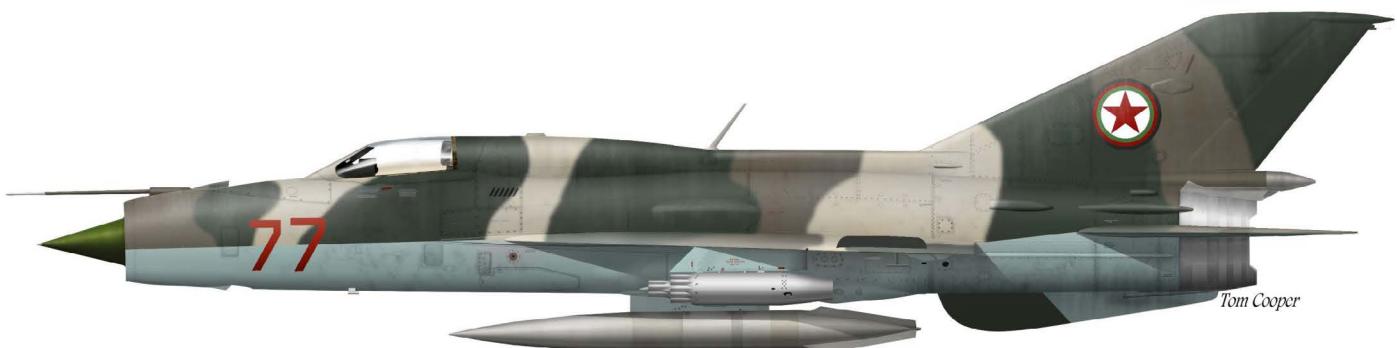
Meanwhile, Massoud was too careful to conduct a major offensive in winter – a step he later reportedly regretted.¹ Indeed, while the Taliban's 7-8,000 men were freezing around Kabul, stronger government forces sat and waited, despite being well-supplied, highly

motivated and ready for action. When on 10 May Massoud finally ordered an offensive, it did not change the overall strategic situation around the capital, although under pressure of government tanks and helicopter gunships the Taliban lost some ground. The offensive's main objective – Chahar Asiab base – remained in Taliban hands which also meant that the Taliban did not lose its capacity to shell Kabul. That the movement was not reluctant to use its rockets and artillery was apparent when after protracted negotiations with the Rabbani government, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar arrived in the capital at the end of June to assume the office of prime minister. The Taliban then launched a 'welcome salvo' of 300 rockets which killed dozens of civilians.

The Hekmatyar-Rabbani alliance could be seen as the least probable, yet after the series of defeats that the Taliban had inflicted upon Hezb-e Islami, Hekmatyar might have considered the alliance



The Afghan military has been known for making changes in its insignia following every major political shuffle. As is visible in the first two columns on the left, from the 1930s to 1992, the Afghan air force and the army changed their insignia four times. As if this was not enough, after the mujahideen victory in 1992, Afghan skies literally 'exploded' with different designs of roundels used by the various parties. Although most of what is featured here is only based on available photos (unfortunately, there is no official documentation available), it is very likely that Junbish-e Milli (Dostum), Jamiat-e Islami (Massoud, Ismail Khan, and Mulla Naqibullah) and Hezb-e Islami (Hekmatyar) initially used exactly the same roundel consisting of the traditional green/black/red triangle with letters A, P and W in the Persian or Pashto alphabet. It is even possible that the Najibullah regime began adopting this insignia in the last months of its existence and the victorious parties simply continued to use this design. In many cases, letters A, P and W were not applied. Later, possibly after Dostum turned against Massoud in 1994, Jamiat-e Islami changed the red section of the triangle to white to differentiate its insignia from that of their enemy. Meanwhile, Dostum began using his party's crest as a roundel on military vehicles and also on several helicopters. Not bothering with standardisation, Jamiat introduced several additional versions of its roundels. For example, on military vehicles the triangle was applied directly onto the camouflage colours and in 2001, an entirely new 'ground forces crest' was adopted. The Taliban never introduced any standard insignia. Some of its machines flew with no markings at all, others probably had their previous owners' insignia repainted with a hastily applied green 'roundel'. In some cases, this was outlined with a black circle and probably had a small Taliban crest applied in the centre, although the available photos are too blurry to reveal any details of this design. The movement's transport planes – both military and civilian – usually had a small white flag of the Taliban applied right behind the cabin. Some of the movement's helicopters sported a large Taliban flag on the fuselage while others had the movement's crest applied on the cargo door. Taliban ground units based in Kabul used a 'ground forces crest' applied in golden colour directly over the camouflage. (Artworks by Tom Cooper)



Although delivered to Afghanistan in the 1970s, some MiG-21FLs survived long enough to participate in battles that the Afghan military fought, without direct Soviet involvement, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Typical camouflage of MiG-21FLs – probably applied before delivery, and then in patterns that differed from aircraft to aircraft – consisted of sand, beige, or light grey-green, dark green, and brown. Generally similar in their shape (though with a marked difference in the cockpit area), Afghan MiG-21PFMs delivered in the 1970s were left in bare metal overall. This MiG-21FL, serial number 77, is shown as armed with UB-16-57 pods for unguided 57mm rockets. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



The main artwork shows a MiG-21bis-K operated by 322nd Regiment based at Bagram AB in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Painted in the classic variant of the 'horns' camouflage pattern in beige (BS381C/388) and olive green (BS381C/283), the machine had its rear section replaced with one taken from a late-mark MiG-21bis delivered to Afghanistan in the late 1980s with wide strips in light earth, grey-green, dark beige, and black-green. Notably, the undersides were always painted in light admiralty grey (BS381C/697). Most frequently, DRAAF and then AAF jets received roundels in six positions. The inset shows the front of a different MiG-21bis-K, as found by US troops at Bagram AB after the fall of the Taliban regime. This wore the same camouflage pattern of dark yellow sand, green-grey, and black-green as applied on jets of the same variant delivered to – for example – Mozambique and the Congo-Brazzaville in the early 1980s, and South Yemen in the mid-1980s. 363 is shown armed with a FAB-250M-62 bomb, and 313 with two FAB-100M54s. (Artworks by Tom Cooper)



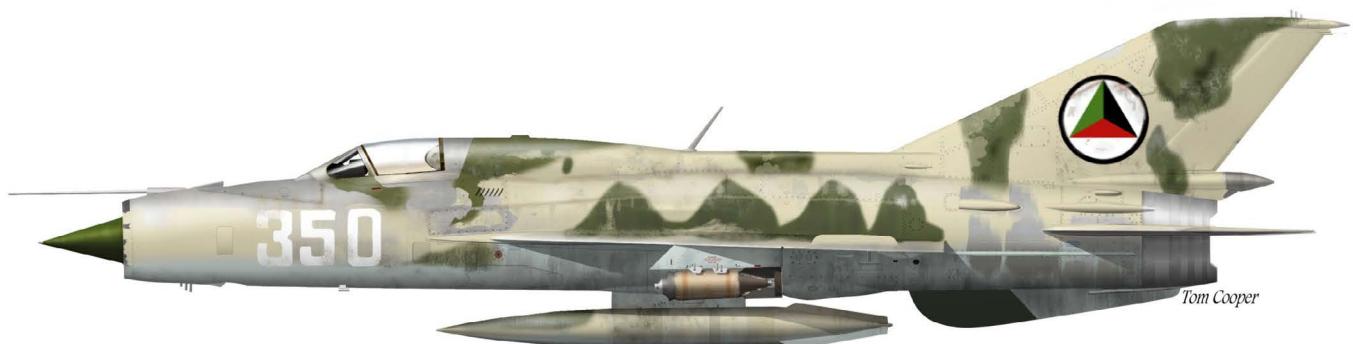
Many AAF aircraft were left idle right after the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992, and never reactivated, even if it appears that some work was subsequently undertaken on them. MiG-21bis serial number 924 – the same jet known to have been used as a 'background' for at least one group-photo of the Taliban pilots in around 1997-1998 – was found by US troops within the maintenance facilities of Kabul IAP in November 2001. It had obviously had its rear fuselage replaced by the same section from a different MiG-21bis but the related works were never completed. Thus, the jet almost certainly spent nearly 20 years parked in the same spot. Inset is shown another MiG-21bis found by US troops at Bagram AB, probably wearing a different version of the same camouflage pattern in beige, light earth, grey-green, and black-green. Both are shown as armed with UB-16-57 pods for 57mm S-5K unguided rockets. (Artworks by Tom Cooper)



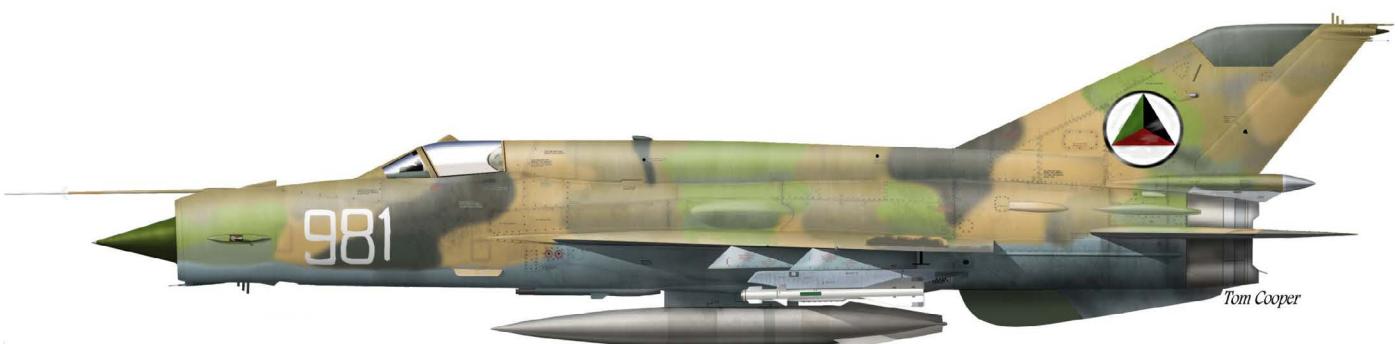
This Sukhoi Su-22M4, serial number 822, operated from Kabul IAP in late April 1992, performing attacks against Hezb-e Islami mujahideen that were short of capturing large sections of the capital. In those turbulent days, the airport area came under the control of Dostum's militia. Most of the former pilots of the AAF quickly switched sides and placed themselves at the service of the Uzbek general and, therefore, they continued flying combat operations with the same purpose as before: to prevent Islamic fundamentalists from establishing their reign over the country. Although many former AAF aircraft had green/black/red triangle insignia applied as soon as in April 1992, this particular machine had its roundels overpainted with camouflage colours. It is shown as armed with a single FAB-500M-62 bomb; perhaps the heaviest armament in the Afghan arsenal of the 1980s and the 1990s. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



When the rebellious General Dostum wrestled control of Mazar-e Sharif from President Najibullah's army, he also captured all of the aircraft of the Czechoslovak-made Aero L-39C Albatros jet trainer-equipped 393rd Regiment. This machine serialised 0021 miraculously survived not only the intense fighting engulfing northern provinces in the late 1990s but also Allied airstrikes in 2001 and – after completing overhaul in Russia – entered service in the newly-established Afghan National Army Air Corps. Here it is shown as it was found at Sheberghan AB after the fall of the Taliban, still carrying Dostum's triangle insignia, apparently with some letters added to it. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This is one of several MiG-21PFMs used by Dostum's forces after April 1992. It carried a very worn-out, locally-applied version of the classic 'horns' camouflage pattern. This consisted of beige (which was then bleached by sun, dust and rainfall) or of light sand, and olive green on top surfaces and sides, and light admiralty grey on undersurfaces. As on all the Afghan MiG-21PFMs, the serial should have originally been applied in red, but was probably overpainted in white while the jet served with the Junbish air force. Roundels are known to have been applied in six positions. The aircraft is shown as armed with a FAB-250M-54 bomb under the wing. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This is a reconstruction of Dostum's MiG-21bis-K serial 981 as of the first half of the 1990s. Most likely, the aircraft was originally painted in another version of the same camouflage pattern as applied on MiG-21bis 313, 924, and 978 (and as also used on MiG-21s exported to the Congo-Brazzaville, Mozambique, and South Yemen during the 1980s) – i.e. in beige or dark sand, grey-green, black-green, and light earth – but, over the years this faded into an almost indistinguishable mix of diverse shades of brown-green. Undersurfaces appear to have been originally painted in light admiralty grey, but became quite dark over time. It received the triangle insignia in all six usual positions, and is shown as armed with a R-60M or R-60MK (ASCC/NATO codename 'AA-8 Aphid') short range, infra-red homing air-to-air missile. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This was one of the longest-serving Afghan MiG-21bis-Ks. Probably delivered in around 1988-1989, it was captured by Dostum in Mazar-e Sharif and flown by his pilots up to 1997 when the Junbish air force was taken over by Abdul Malik Pahlawan (who forced Dostum into exile). This MiG-21 was flown out to Kulob airport in Tajikistan when Abdul Malik ordered his jet pilots to evacuate their aircraft there. It remained grounded at Kulob until March when it was flown to Kabul but tragically it crashed only a few days later, killing its pilot. Available photographs clearly show that the roundels were applied on either side of the fin only. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



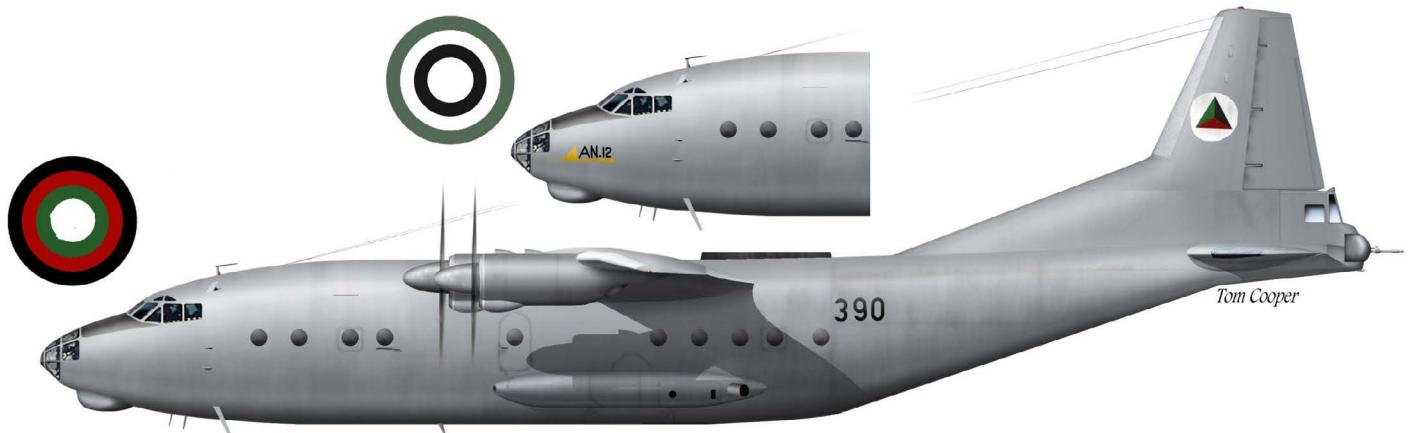
During the late 1980s, the USSR delivered a large number of MiG-21UM two-seat conversion trainers to the DRAAF. They received different camouflage patterns and usually wore four-digit serial numbers starting with 0. This well-known example was photographed on several occasions over the years; wearing a relatively small serial number 0549 in red, shortly after delivery; then wearing the same serial number but re-applied as shown on the main artwork here, apparently following some sort of a local overhaul. It was later photographed wearing the same serial but crudely applied over its 'big, red' version while serving with the Junbish air force. By this time, the green-black-red triangle within the roundel on its fin was applied in an unusual fashion towards the top of the roundel. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



A sizeable fleet of Su-17/Su-22s jets helped Dostum's Junbish-e Milli party to project its military might over distant battlefields all across the country. Operating from Mazar-e Sharif and Sheberghan, Sukhoi fighter-bombers armed with free-fall bombs of different types carried out air raids on Shindand, Herat, Bagram, Kandahar, and the Panjshir Valley, but especially against targets in the Kabul area, and then foremost against the militias of the Hezb-e Islami party. Later, Massoud's formations, and after 1996 the Taliban, became their primary targets. Many were shot down by ground fire, some even in air combats with Massoud's MiG-21s operated from Bagram. Unsurprisingly, this example – wearing one of two principal camouflage patterns applied on Su-22M-4Ks exported in the late 1980s – was seen on a video while armed with R-60M/MK air-to-air missiles for self-defence purposes, in addition to RBK-250 CBUs. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



One of the least-well-known facts about the DRAAF/AAF is that at sometime between 1989 and 1992 it received a sizeable batch of Su-17 and Su-17UM-2D fighter-bombers, originally manufactured for service in the Soviet air force, and never previously exported. This Su-17UM-2D subsequently served with Dostum's air force: it was originally painted in dark brown and dark green, but – as so often in civil wars – had its national insignia crudely overpainted in olive green. Moreover, its camouflage pattern was subsequently 'refreshed' with other shades of green and, possibly, beige or sand, and was then heavily worn out by the time it was photographed for the last time. As usual for all two-seat training/conversion-trainer aircraft of the former DRAAF/AAF, it received a serial starting with 0. Although well-documented in photographs and videos, its eventual fate remains unknown. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



As far as it is known, several An-12 four-engine transports of the ex-communist air force were used by Dostum, Massoud, and the Taliban in the 1990s. The machine reconstructed in the main artwork here was an ill-fated example belonging to Dostum that landed outside the airport in the Uzbek city of Termez in February 1993, broke its undercarriage, and was never repaired. Finished in (worn out) medium-grey overall – as usual for this type – it had a new green/black/red triangle insignia painted on either side of the fin. However, it retained old communist roundels on its wings where the red star was overpainted with white. The inset shows the front section of the well-documented An-12 serial number 405, photographed in derelict condition at Bagram AB in 1999-2000, and several times since. Inset next to it is the unique roundel in green-white-black-white applied on its fin and wings, known to have been applied only to this aircraft. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



Over time, several of Dostum's helicopters had their original dark olive green livery enhanced through the addition of various forms of disruptive camouflage patterns – usually in yellow or sand, light green, or black, sometimes applied in small patches, other times in irregular strips, as shown here. As obvious, the boom of this Mi-8T came from another example, where the dark olive green was almost washed out. Helicopters repainted in this fashion (other known serials are 605 and 606) usually received the crest of the Junbish-e Milli Islamic party instead of the triangle insignia. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



MiG-21FL serial 72 is known to have been operational at Mazar-e Sharif AB in 1992 as part of Massoud's air force, and serials 74 and 77 were also photographed there. Later on, it seems that 74 and 77 were cannibalised to extract spare parts used to keep 72 in operational condition. Upper surfaces and sides of the latter aircraft were also repainted in this very unusual blue colour, which was badly worn out by the time it was photographed for the last time in 1999-2000. Undersurfaces were left in light admiralty grey. Roundels of the Jamiat-e Islami were probably applied atop of those of the former DRAAF in six positions. The aircraft is shown as armed with UB-16-57 pods for 57mm S-5K unguided rockets. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



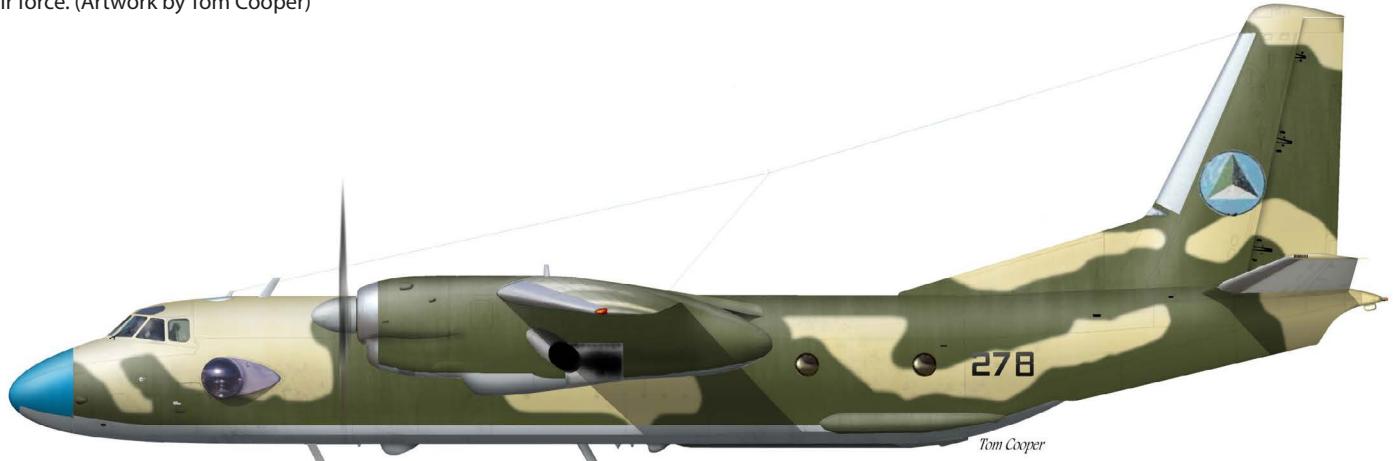
A sizeable number of MiG-21bis operated by the DRAAF and then the AAF in the early 1990s were handed over by the Soviet air force. They had their Red Stars and 'borts' (classic, big, two-digit serials) crudely overpainted in grey, and – usually rather small – Afghan roundels and serials applied instead. Known examples wore Afghan serials 308 and 311, as shown in the main artwork here. All were found in derelict state at Bagram AB in November 2001, with no new insignia applied over them: this meant that they were – probably, but not certainly – non-operational as of April 1992, and never re-activated. The smaller insets show how the grey colour, and then the Afghan serial 311 were applied on the right side of the aircraft's nose, and a reconstruction of how the Soviet borts ('12 in white outline' and 'red 73') would have looked before delivery. Both of these numbers became visible once the Afghan-applied serial was washed out. The main inset shows a reconstruction of the MiG-21bis-K serial number 335. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This was one of the Bagram-based Su-22M-4Ks that Massoud's 'government air force' routinely used in battles with Hezb-e Islami, Wahdat, Junbish, the Taliban, and other enemies in the period between April 1992 and September 1996 when the air base was overrun by the Taliban. It was painted in beige, blue-green and chocolate brown on upper surfaces, applied following a standard pattern (also applied on Su-22M-4Ks delivered to Angola and South Yemen around the same time), with lower surfaces in light admiralty grey. Notable is the Jamiat-e Islami roundel with letters A, P and W: this was worn in six positions. Former communist regime insignia was overpainted with yellow hence the yellow circle visible around the roundel on the fin. On the wings, the communist insignia was overpainted in the same fashion. The aircraft probably became unserviceable before the Taliban captured Bagram and thus the Islamic movement didn't transfer it to a safer airport. The machine was found in one of the hangars of Bagram by US troops in 2001. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



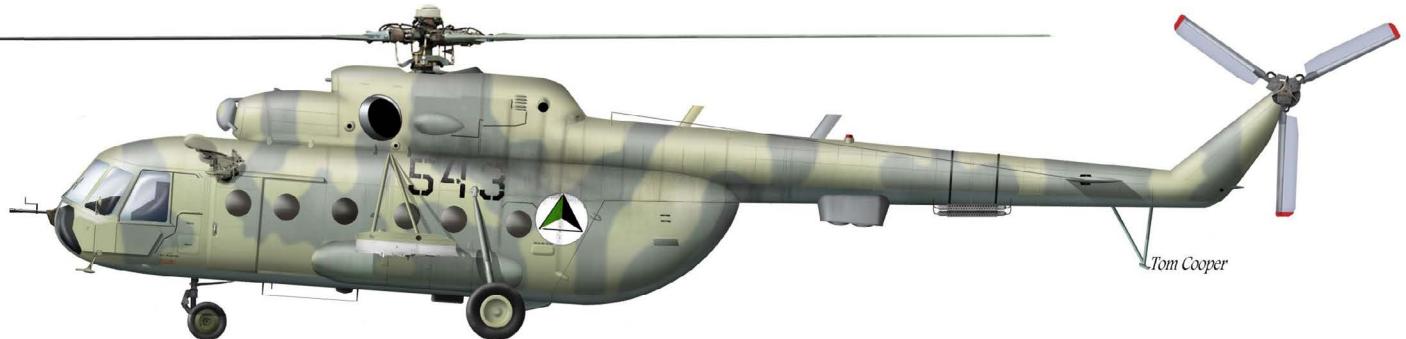
This Su-22UM3 two-seater was one of the last fighter jets operated by Massoud's forces from Bagram AB where it remained active probably until late September 1996 when the base was captured by the Taliban. When serving in Massoud's air force, the machine was partially overhauled and received a new camouflage of yellow sand, dark brown, olive green, and blue- or black-green on upper surfaces, and light blue lower surfaces. The white serial 068 was apparently applied by hand and large Jamiat roundels were carried on the fin and possibly also on the wings. If not destroyed on the ground in fighting between Massoud's forces and the Taliban, it is possible that this Sukhoi was later flown out of Bagram and operated by the Islamic movement's air force. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



Several An-26s remained active within Massoud's 'government air force', flying not only between Bagram and Kabul but also moving cargo to and from all areas controlled by different Jamiat-e Islami and other pro-government commanders throughout the country. After being pushed to the enclave in the north-east by the victorious Taliban, Massoud's remaining An-26s, including the machine shown here, were used for delivering supplies from airports in Tajikistan. At least two of Massoud's An-26s carried a rather unique variant of the Jamiat-e Islami insignia consisting of the green/black/white triangle placed over a blue disc. Like most Afghan-operated aircraft it received a relatively standardised camouflage pattern consisting of sand and dark olive green on upper surfaces and sides, and light admiralty grey on undersurfaces. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



An all-white Jamiat-e Islami An-32 decorated with stripes of light blue and dark green, with the classical Jamiat-e Islami triangle placed over a blue disc on the fin. The presence of this insignia on the wings remains unconfirmed. This machine served as a 'VIP carrier' for the Northern Alliance officials and crashed in August 1998 in Bamiyan killing the ousted government's Prime Minister Ghafoorzai. Other Jamiat An-32s carried a camouflage of light brown and one or two shades of green and had Jamiat roundels applied in six positions. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This is one of many Mi-8/Mi-17 helicopters operated by Massoud's 'government forces' in the mid-1990s before the service was much reduced by the victorious Taliban. The helicopter carried what appears to be a faded-out standard 'sand and spinach' camouflage pattern, applied on most of the Afghan Mi-8/17s, and most of the Soviet Mi-8s deployed in the country during the 1980s, and which originally consisted of light grey-green and olive green. Notably, the lower surfaces were painted in light blue, rather than light admiralty grey in this case. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This is one of the few Mi-8MTV-1 or Mi-17 helicopters operated by Hezb-e Islami from the Chahar Asiab base south of Kabul. It carried the standard camouflage pattern of Afghan Mi-8/Mi-17s and sported a green/black/red triangle roundel with Farsi letters A, P and W – as applied on a number of aircraft and helicopters probably in April 1992, and used by several different civil factions at the same time. The last known photos of this – meanwhile damaged – helicopter were taken in February 1995 after the Taliban had captured Chahar Asiab. If repaired, it is possible that it was later operated by the Taliban air force. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



One of the ex-Russian Mi-8MTs delivered to the ousted Rabbani/Massoud government in the late 1990s was this example carrying black serial 563. It carried a very worn-out camouflage of light brown and dark brown (which by the time it was serving in Afghanistan was almost unrecognizable) 'refreshed', randomly, with light blue. Soviet/Russian insignia was crudely overpainted with dark green. The machine performed regular supply flights between airports in Tajikistan and Massoud's bases in north-eastern Afghanistan, including the Panjshir Valley, between 1997 and 2001. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This Mi-35 belonging to Massoud's forces operated from the Panjshir Valley and bases in the north-east, performing sporadic air strikes against the Taliban. Its original, standardised camouflage pattern of dark yellow sand and green, applied before delivery to the Najibullah government in 1990 was by 1998 heavily worn out into shades depicted here. After the fall of the Taliban it underwent an overhaul in Russia, and was then returned to service with the newly-established ANAAC. Notable is the relatively unusual armament consisting of a B-8M pod for 80mm S-8K unguided rockets: such weapons appeared in Afghanistan only from the mid-1990s. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This Mi-24V or Mi-35 was seen in the Panjshir Valley in October 2001, wearing no markings whatsoever. It was either one of several original helicopter gunships that Massoud's forces evacuated before the Taliban captured Bagram in late September 1996 (photographic evidence exists for at least two of them being overpainted in dark colours in late 2001) or one of the newly-delivered ex-Russian machines paid for by Indian money. While upper surfaces of this helicopter were camouflaged in olive green, blue-green, and chocolate brown, lower surfaces were painted in very light grey. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This BMP-1 is one of several of Massoud's vehicles whose firepower was enhanced by adding a weapon designed for use from aircraft: in this case the UPK-23 gun pod containing a 23mm twin-barrel GSh-23 automatic gun. In the late 1990s, with plenty of rocket pods and other aircraft weapon types still available, but very limited means of deploying them in combat, Massoud's technicians attached several of them to BMP-1s, and a number of trucks and jeeps. Contrary to the usual practice in the Afghan Army, the BMP-1 shown has received a camouflage pattern in wide strips of beige applied over its overall olive green. The same colours were later seen on Massoud's ZU-23-2s, BM-21s, T-55s, and other combat vehicles. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



This is one of two former Taliban MiG-21s that survived allied airstrikes in October 2001. Both were reactivated shortly after Ismail Khan captured western Afghanistan from the Taliban, and sporadically flown from both Herat and Shindand airports for a few years before being dumped at a huge Shindand scrapyard. This example received a new camouflage scheme consisting of light yellow sand, dark green, and red-brown on upper surfaces and sides, and light blue on lower surfaces. The large roundel on the fin represents a new, post-Taliban Afghan Air Force insignia. As far as it is known, no roundels were applied on the wings. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



The other former Taliban jet that avoided destruction in October 2001 was this MiG-21UM. It had already received a unique camouflage pattern of beige, olive drab, and brown, on upper surfaces and sides when in service of the IEAAF. Upper wing surfaces seem to have been painted in beige and dark green only. Lower surfaces were finished in light admiralty grey, indicating the use of colours found in depots of the former DRAAF/AAF. The new national marking was only carried on the fin. Although the machine is known to have been equipped with S-24B unguided rockets (and is shown in that configuration), it is not known if it ever flew any combat sorties after the fall of the Taliban. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This is a reconstruction of one of Ismail Khan's Su-17M2s that was found in a derelict state at Shindand AB in 2001. Although faded out after years under the hot sun and with randomly applied patches of several different colours over it, most likely it was originally camouflaged in brown, grey-green, and dark green, as with many other jets of the Soviet air force. During and after their withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Soviets provided multiple batches of jets from their own inventory to the Najibullah government – including Su-17M2s that at earlier times would never have been exported. Following the fall of the communist regime, Shindand AB was taken over by Hezb-e Islami, and then by Jamiat commander Ismail Khan, who established a small air force that saw combat against the Taliban. The insert shows another of Ismail Khan's Sukhois: a Su-22M-4K wearing the standardised camouflage pattern in beige, chocolate brown, and blue-green, and the serial number 88 and which also had Jamiat-e Islami's roundels applied in six positions. (Artworks by Tom Cooper)



This Mil Mi-8T, serial number 629, probably was one of the very last aircraft operated by Ismail Khan's forces after these had been ousted from Herat. Painted in a three-tone beige, dark earth, and olive green camouflage pattern on top surfaces and sides, it had its undersurfaces painted either in light grey or light admiralty grey. It was last seen active in north-western Afghanistan in early 1997, hauling supplies for Ismail Khan's fighters re-deployed from Iran to mount an – eventually unsuccessful – offensive against the Taliban. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This was one of several Mi-8Ts operated by the small air arm of Kandahar commander Mulla Naqibullah Akhund, between April 1992 and autumn 1994 when Mulla Naqibullah joined the Taliban, significantly helping the movement in establishing its rule over the large southern city. The simple camouflage of this machine consisting of dark green upper surfaces and light grey or light blue lower surfaces indicate that this helicopter originated from the initial batches of Mi-8Ts delivered to Afghanistan in the 1970s, although it is possible that it was delivered only in the late 1980s from stocks of the Soviet air force. Barely visible underneath the black Afghan serial number 695, are remnants of its former Soviet serial, possibly 55 or 95. Because Mulla Naqibullah was a follower of the Jamiat-e Islami party, his helicopters carried the typical Jamiat green/black/white triangle insignia. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This all-green SA-13 TEL was one of many heavy weapons captured by Hezb-e Wahdat forces in western Kabul in April 1992 (the others including T-54, T-55, and T-62 tanks, BTR-60 and BTR-70 APCs, and Scud missiles with TELs). However, being short of properly trained personnel, the Shia party's forces probably could not utilise much of its advanced weaponry in combat and they usually deployed them for 'psychological warfare' instead. Various videos showing parades by Hezb-e Wahdat indicate that the vehicle received the crest of that party applied on either side of the hull – as was also a common practice with vehicles operated by other parties in the Kabul area. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



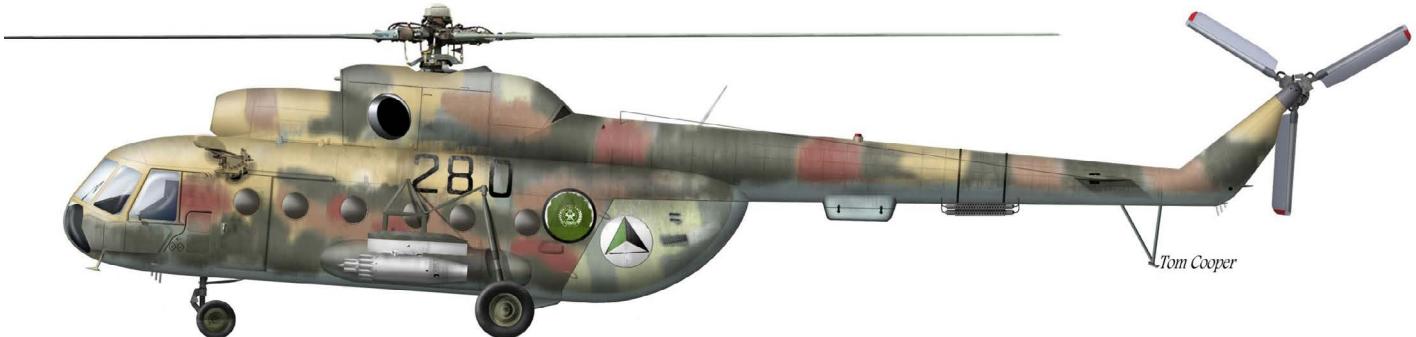
Probably the most exotic aircraft in the skies of Afghanistan in the 1990s was this Fairchild-Hiller FH-227E of Bamiyan Air. Originally operated by Isleña Airlines from Honduras, it was provided to Hezb-e Wahdat for transporting party officials between Iran and the town of Bamiyan in the 1997-1998 period. Due to the lack of clear photographs and videos, it remains unclear if it retained the insignia of its former owner on the fin, the Honduran flag and the registration HR-IAU, or not. What is sure is that the title Isleña in Spanish was replaced by Bamiyan Air in Farsi. By 1999, once Wahdat lost much of its territory to the Taliban, it was left stored at Tehran International. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)



Photographs of Taliban jets are extremely rare. One of them was taken at Kandahar airport after the US invasion, showing a derelict MiG-21bis serial number 301 with a large green Taliban roundel applied on the fin. Precise details of the roundel are not known, however, although available photos show what may be a Taliban crest applied in white in the centre of the roundel, there is not a single photo showing the insignia in detail. MiG-21s together with Su-17s and Su-22s were real 'workhorses' of the Taliban air force, supporting every important offensive the Taliban conducted. Although the main air base of the Taliban was Kandahar IAP, the movement's fighter jets flown by former communist pilots were regularly deployed to Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif, and other airports close to the frontlines. The aircraft is shown equipped with a single FAB-250-200 general purpose bomb and also a chaff-and-flare dispenser under the rear fuselage. Both were in widespread use on Afghan MiG-21s of the late 1980s and through the 1990s. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This drawing is a reconstruction of a Taliban-operated Su-17M-2D clandestinely photographed at Kandahar in 2000. Although far from being clear, the photograph is strongly indicative of a camouflage consisting of beige and dark green, perhaps with splotches of blue-green or black in several spots. No roundels are visible and seemingly, these were overpainted in green, or replaced by a Taliban roundel poorly visible against the dark background. Notable is the left wing, which was taken from another aircraft and still showing traces of either beige or dark yellow sand and olive green. The serial number remains unclear, but serials of Afghan Su-17M-2D were somewhere in the range 860-890. The aircraft is shown as armed with a RBK-500 CBU. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



Perhaps the best-known former Taliban helicopter was this highly interesting Mi-8T. It was not only armed with UB-16-57 pods but also equipped with cockpit armour plates and the hoist winch of a Mi-17 when found in a derelict state at Kandahar airport in late 2001. Although heavily worn out, the camouflage pattern is known to have consisted of yellow sand, olive green, and brown - as applied on many other Mi-8Ts in Afghanistan. The rear door was obviously replaced with the doors from another helicopter and - in the hard times of a country ruined by decades of continued war - the Taliban applied their roundel over the old one. The second roundel came with the replacement rear doors. While the first two digits of this helicopter's serial remain unclear, the last one was 0: some Afghan Mi-8Ts modified to Mi-17-like standard wore serials in the range 261-289, while others wore serials starting with 00 (0041, 0042, etc.). This one is shown with the conjectural serial 280. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



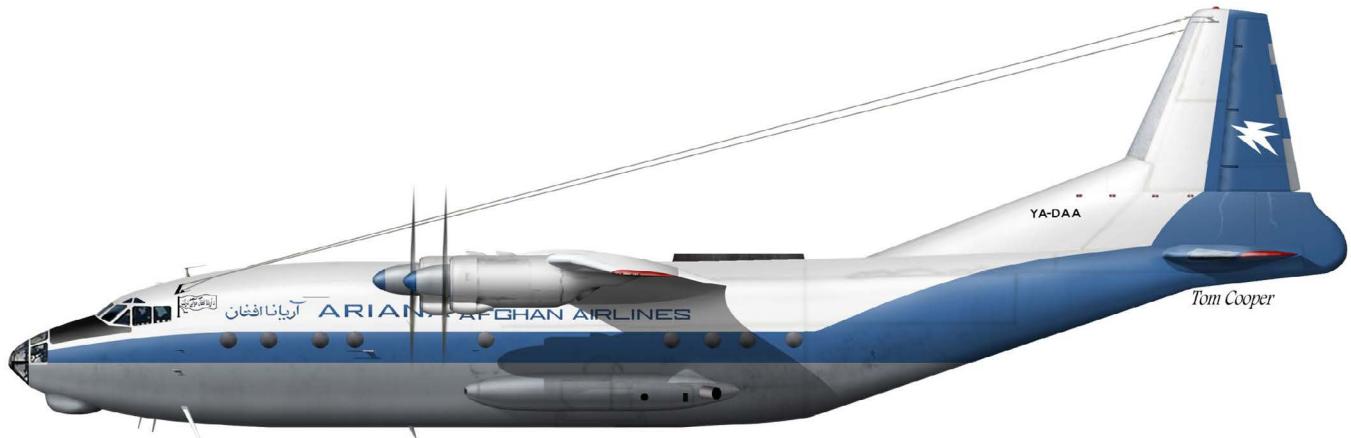
This Mi-8MTV-1 armed with a 7.62mm PKT machinegun fired from the cockpit represents one of a handful of well-maintained helicopters of the IEAAF presented to the public during a huge military parade in Kabul of August 2001, and also one of very few that were well-documented by photography. Notable is not only the freshly-applied camouflage pattern in light olive green and dark green, but also a large Taliban flag and the serial 549 re-applied in its usual position in white. The undersides were also 'mint', and painted in light blue. Its ultimate fate remains unknown, but if not destroyed in US airstrikes on Bagram and Kandahar in late 2001, it was subsequently incorporated into the ANAAC. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This Mi-8MTV-1 or Mi-17 was another of only a handful of Taliban-operated helicopters – apparently – overhauled and then completely re-painted in the 1999-2001 period. Eventually, it was well-documented in multiple photographs, while wearing a camouflage pattern in olive green and dark blue. Of particular interest is the roundel applied on the rear doors, which apparently consisted of the crest of the Taliban movement. In all, three different insignia have been documented as carried by Taliban aircraft: the green roundel, white flag with Arabic script, and the movement's crest. Many individual machines, including MiG-21s, L-39s, and An-32s captured from Ismail Khan, Dostum, and Massoud served in the IEAAF carrying their former owners' markings. Apparently, the Taliban never bothered to unify their aircraft insignia, using different designs at the same time instead – often probably according to the preference of the local mullah. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



Together with the Mi-8MTV, two Mi-24Vs – or their export variant Mi-35s – participated in the military parade in Kabul in 2001. One of them, carrying serial 106 and the large Taliban flag on the boom, has had its old camouflage pattern ‘refreshed’ with lots of dark blue-green, and undersurfaces completely repainted in light blue. Although still resembling the standard camouflage of Mi-35s delivered to Afghanistan, the pattern of dark green patches was slightly different in most of places around the airframe. As far as it is known, all Taliban Hinds were destroyed in the allied bombing raids in October 2001. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This is one of a few Antonov An-12Bs operated by Ariana Afghan Airlines, routinely flying to Sharjah International in the United Arab Emirates of the 1990s, while transporting not only commercial cargo and passengers, but also terrorists, drugs, weapons, and ammunition. The Taliban and al-Qaeda took over the civilian Ariana airliner and used its aircraft foremost for their own purposes. Notable is the small Taliban flag applied right behind the cockpit, a frequent practice on all Ariana aircraft, including such as Tupolev Tu-154 passenger aircraft. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



When the Taliban captured Kabul in late September 1996, they found a large fleet of military hardware left behind by the ousted government forces. Most of the weapon systems were put back in use, including this SA-13 TEL. Although nothing is known about their actual operational status, several of them were repainted with patches of sand, green, brown and a very dark colour – possibly black or black-green – and included in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Air Defence Forces. A Taliban ground forces logo and a serial were applied on both sides of the upper front hull. At least a few Taliban SA-13s avoided destruction in the Allied air attacks in 2001 and at the time of writing of this book, they were still to be found in a huge scrapyard outside Kabul. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



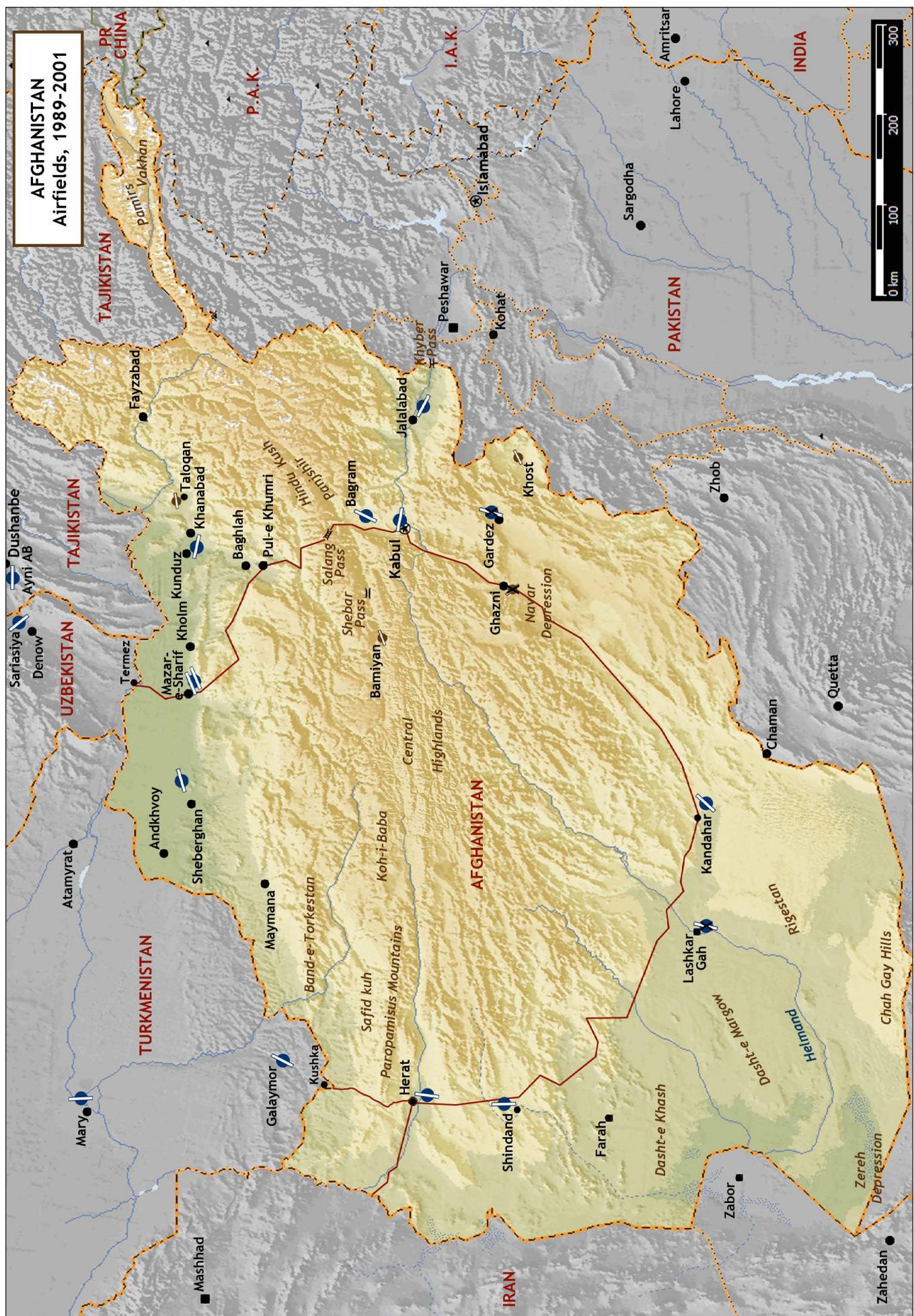
FROG-7

As the Soviets were withdrawing from Afghanistan, they delivered a huge number of weapons to the armed forces of the Najibullah government. Afghan ground forces received not only hundreds of tanks, IFVs and APCs but also Luna-M/FROG-7 tactical rockets. An interesting example from 1990 is shown here: being the 1000th rocket fired in Afghanistan, it was decorated with a small shark mouth and had the inscription '1000th Death to the Enemy' applied in red, in the Russian language, on the left side. Although the weapons were manned by Afghan crews, Soviet advisers were still present, helping to operate the sophisticated equipment. Note the Afghan army roundel on the 9P113 transporter erector launcher cabin door. (Artworks by Tom Cooper & David Bocquelet)

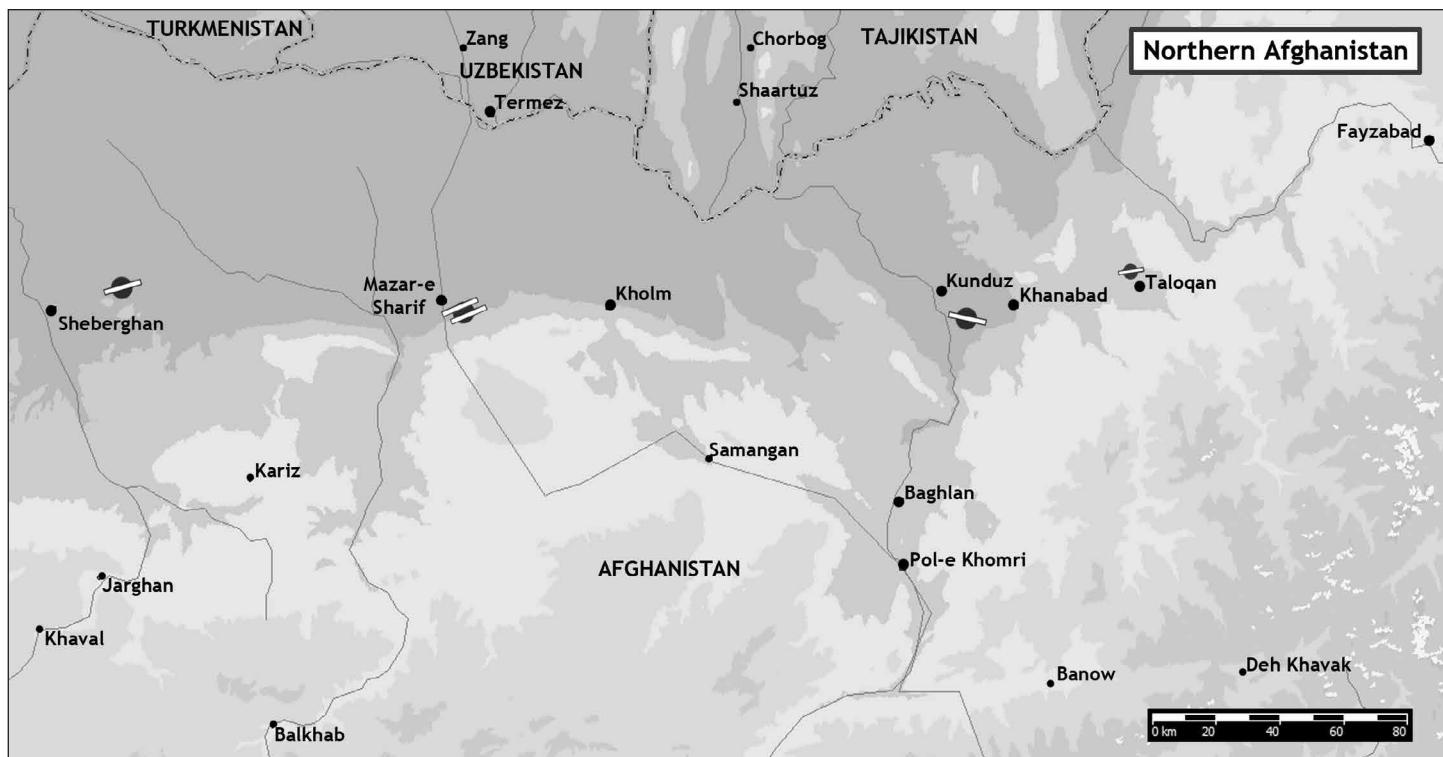


SS-1C Scud

This is one of commander Massoud's Scuds that remained operational in the Panjshir Valley up to the Allied invasion in late 2001. Carrying a new variant of the Jamiat-e Islami ground forces' roundel and the white serial 313, the vehicle was later transferred to Kabul and taken over by the Afghan National Army. Inset are earlier variants of Jamiat-e Islami markings; one of the illustrations shows a section of the vehicle that had its dark green camouflage colour oversprayed with randomly applied patches of sand, possibly in an effort to repair the faded-out basic colour. (Artworks by Tom Cooper & David Bocquelet)



Map of Afghanistan showing major air bases and airfields of the 1980s and 1990s.



A map of northern Afghanistan with three major airfields in that area (from west to east): Sheberghan; a small facility but of vital importance for Dostum; the large Mazar-e Sharif Air Base, and the secondary installation near Kunduz. Taloqan had only a short dirt-strip, sufficient for helicopter operations, but dangerous even for medium-sized transports. (Map by Tom Cooper)

with the government to be his last chance to survive as a significant political leader. Some of his troops arrived in Kabul as well, namely at Pul-e Charkhi base, which certainly did not boost the morale of the government units that had been battling Hezb-e Islami for years and witnessed all the destruction and mayhem Hekmatyar had caused in the capital. By allying with the government, Hezb-e Islami forces should have served as another layer of defence against the Taliban, but they soon proved to be a burden instead. Hezb-e Islami, despite being given an array of weapons and lots of cash by the CIA, Pakistan, and other backers during the times of the anti-Soviet jihad, had been known for never winning a single significant battle. Mere inclusion in the government camp could not change its poor performance on the battlefield: in August 1996 the party lost its major base of Spin-Shigha in the province of Paktia and the Taliban overran its positions in the province of Paktika as well. Occasional government air raids against the attacking Taliban were ineffective. Soon, the last important town still in the hands of Hekmatyar was Sarobi, east of Kabul on the highway to Jalalabad.

After the series of defeats, Hekmatyar started pressuring Massoud to send his troops outside the defence perimeter of Kabul to assist his units in the fight against the radical movement. Massoud, after some hesitation, fatefully agreed. His decision, which was driven more by politics than by military realities on the ground resulted in a weakening of the government army's positions in the capital and increased its vulnerability against the Taliban attacks.² The Taliban's aerial bombardment of government targets conducted during the summer of 1996 may also have contributed to softening the defences of Kabul. Meanwhile in the north, Dostum's forces skirmished with those of Jamiat commander Atta Mohammad Nur near Mazar-e Sharif in the last week of July: Kabul was practically encircled by hostile forces from all sides except for the north-east. The conflict with Dostum, however, had a positive development: after negotiations, a formal cease-fire agreement was concluded, which led to a prisoner

exchange and reopening of the important Salang Tunnel north of Kabul for civilian traffic by the end of August.

On 15 July, a Taliban MiG-21bis carrying four R-60 anti-aircraft missiles appeared over Kabul and after some circling over the city changed course towards Bagram where it eventually landed. At a press conference shortly after, the 28-year old pilot Abdul Jalil – the first Taliban airman who changed sides – claimed that he had defected from the Taliban and accused Pakistan of sending mechanics to maintain the Taliban aircraft based at Kandahar airport. The pilot also claimed that he took off from Kandahar for what his superiors thought would be a routine patrol and that he initially intended to land at Kabul but had to change his course after encountering strong anti-aircraft fire over the capital. Government air force representatives were extremely glad to receive the R-60 missiles as the number of these weapons in government stocks was low; at that moment, the government did not know that their jet pilots would have no further chances to use the missiles in combat.

In the summer of 1996, the Saudi intelligence chief visited Islamabad and Kandahar and soon after certain Saudi and Pakistani elements agreed to increase support for the Taliban. Consequently, by overrunning Hezb-e Islami bases in Paktia, the Taliban reached the border of the province of Nangarhar which was ruled by the Eastern Shura, a loose alliance of various parties' commanders headed by the province's governor Haji Abdul Qadir. With the Taliban on their doorsteps, the actual division of the Shura into two camps became ever more apparent: some leaders were ready to oppose the upcoming Taliban attack while some others actually joined the movement. As in many cases before, lack of unity of their enemies enabled the Taliban to quickly continue their advance: the city of Jalalabad was captured on 11 September practically without a fight after Abdul Qadir had fled to Pakistan. This action also finished the short-lived Khyber Airways founded by Qadir and equipped by a few An-24s that were smuggling drugs from Jalalabad to the UAE. Perhaps most importantly, by conquering Nangarhar, the Taliban 'inherited' Osama bin Laden who

had resettled with his family and entourage in this province earlier in 1996. The Islamic radical who had been under pressure to leave Sudan gladly accepted the invitation by Qadir to move his group to the environment he had known since the 1980s, and after the Taliban had captured Nangarhar he became one of the movement's primary sponsors and supporters.

After securing Jalalabad, Taliban columns immediately set off to the north of the city, overrunning their enemies in the provinces of Kunar and Laghman and virtually routing the last remnants of the Eastern Shura, even if several groups did not give up and waged a low-level insurgency in remote valleys up until 2001. Kabul was now encircled by the Taliban from the west, south and east, with the only escape route leading to the north. The government air force reacted with repeated air strikes against Taliban targets in Jalalabad but these had no effect on the military situation on the ground. The government also sent envoys to Uzbekistan where they met with representatives of Junbish, trying to secure the support of General Dostum which, however, only came later. Meanwhile, Taliban jets dropped bombs on the town of Sarobi east of Kabul.

The Taliban, knowing that the government defences on the western and southern outskirts of the capital were hardly penetrable, exploited the weaknesses of Hezb-e Islami positioned in the east. Hezb-e Islami still controlled Sarobi which could have served as an important point of defence but Hekmatyar's military commanders were on the verge of joining the Islamic movement. When Massoud sent a contingent of 300 men and 10 tanks to assist Hezb-e Islami in defending the town, it was too late. The situation almost immediately turned chaotic with Hekmatyar's fighters fleeing from the fight or defecting to the Taliban. After suffering 60 casualties among his troops, Massoud's General Muslem ordered a withdrawal back to the capital. Sarobi fell into the hands of the Taliban on 24 September.³

The Taliban did not waste any time to regroup and its columns of 4x4 pick-up trucks continued their advance towards Kabul and also into the Tagab Valley which leads from Sarobi to Bagram. This move made the situation of the government even worse because its only functional air base was under an immediate threat of being overrun. However, at this point the overall situation of government forces was desperate. The Taliban was attacking simultaneously from the west, south and east, closing to the capital despite bombardment by Su-22s and Mi-24s from Bagram.

On 26 September, after a meeting with Rabbani and other high-ranking officials, Ahmad Shah Massoud ordered a general withdrawal of the government forces from Kabul to the area north of the capital and further to the Panjshir Valley. This rather controversial decision was most probably motivated by Massoud's intention to save an undamaged army for another day instead of locking it down in street fighting in the encircled city with very uncertain outcomes, although in public, Massoud later stated that the primary motive behind the withdrawal was his desire to protect the lives of Kabul's civilians that had already suffered a lot under bombardment by Hekmatyar, Wahdat, and Dostum. The risky withdrawal was conducted at night and by the morning of 27 September thousands of troops had been successfully evacuated along with most tanks, IFVs, APCs and probably all Scud missile launchers. The Taliban did capture some abandoned hardware including SA-2, SA-3, and SA-13 anti-aircraft missiles when they entered Kabul. Government helicopters and transport aircraft based at Kabul airport were flown away as well but it is almost certain that at least a few Mi-17s were left behind and later included in the Taliban air force. Upon their arrival at the capital, the Taliban also destroyed the Afghan Air Force archives.

After the decision to retreat, Ahmad Shah Massoud evacuated in a Mi-17 helicopter flown by his personal pilot, Brigadier General Mohammad Barat, who had been decorated for valour by both Najibullah and Rabbani. Massoud's senior military leaders, including the air force chief General Mohammad Dawran, intended to land their An-32 (number 350) in the province of Takhar but – due to taking off only after sunset – the crew had to change course to Termez in Uzbekistan as there was no airport in the ousted government's hands equipped with functional lights for night landings. Initially, Termez refused the aircraft the permission to land and the pilot had to declare an emergency after which the airport's lights finally turned on. After landing, the Uzbek authorities confiscated the aircraft and later handed it over to General Dostum. Almost miraculously, the machine continued to fly for the Uzbek general and survived all the turmoil engulfing northern Afghanistan in the late 1990s and after the fall of the Taliban, it was pressed into service within the newly established and US-supported Afghan National Army Air Corps, eventually ending its career only in the early 2010s.

While Massoud established his new headquarters in the town of Jabal-us-Seraj close to the Panjshir, other party leaders who gathered in this town were transported by several Mi-17s to Taloqan further north. Every leader should have used a separate helicopter but Hekmatyar was so afraid of possible sabotage that he insisted on being transported together with President Rabbani: he apparently did not trust his coalition partners and thought that Massoud would make an attempt on his life.⁴

The Taliban victory in Kabul led Russia and Central Asian countries to change their attitude towards the Rabbani government and other anti-Taliban factions. Although Russia maintained a working relationship with the Rabbani government since the very beginning of its establishment (for example, the new Afghan currency was printed in Russia), the Rabbani government's support of Islamic rebels in Tajikistan complicated both sides' cooperation and even led to occasional air raids by Russian aircraft that were based in Tajikistan against Afghan territory. Nevertheless, a threat of the Taliban movement ruling the whole of Afghanistan and possibly exporting its ideology to Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia prompted the Russian and Tajik governments to stand behind Rabbani and Massoud while Uzbekistan and Iran intensified their support to Dostum and Hezb-e Wahdat, respectively.

The fall of Kabul had a positive impact on the civil conflict in Tajikistan where the two sides of the civil war – both of which were equally afraid of the fundamentalist Taliban – finally managed to reach an agreement and end hostilities. Importantly, in the months following Massoud's retreat from Kabul, Tajikistan allowed him to utilise an airport near the town of Kulob in the south of the country. The airport that eventually became the most important opposition base outside Afghanistan served not only as a transit point for deliveries of weapons and ammunition to Massoud's and other factions' forces but also as a hub for their helicopters, transports and, later, fighter jets.

End of the Government Air Force

Encouraged by taking Kabul without a fight, the Taliban that immediately proclaimed themselves to be the legitimate government of Afghanistan, continued their advance to the Shamali plains north of the capital. By the end of September, they captured the towns of Charikar, Jabal-us-Seraj and also took Bagram air base which was hastily abandoned by Massoud's forces. The Taliban also attempted to invade the Panjshir Valley where Massoud and his forces took refuge but the Taliban advance was stopped at the last moment when Massoud's troops blew up rocks at the narrow entrance to the

valley, blocking the only motorable road from the south. The Taliban were also rushing to the strategically important Salang Tunnel, but they had to stop their advance when they encountered the forces of General Dostum who had moved his T-62-equipped armoured units through the tunnel to the area around its southern entrance. Initially, Dostum's position in this stage of the conflict was not clear to anyone and the two sides refrained from attacking each other, as there still was a possibility of Dostum cooperating with the Islamic movement. The events took a different course, though, after a Taliban envoy met Dostum on 8 October. While the Taliban insisted that Dostum surrender, the Uzbek General was actually seeking a broad autonomy under a possible Taliban-led government, which would have guaranteed his continuing dominance in the northern provinces. After the meeting, despite intensive Pakistani diplomatic efforts to keep Dostum in the anti-Rabbani camp, it was evident that the Taliban and Dostum could not agree on a common stance. Indeed, as it was no secret for some time already that the Taliban posed a grave threat to all Afghan non-Pashtuns, and also because the Taliban grew stronger than any other group of the civil war, the three leaders of the major anti-Taliban parties – Jamiat-e Islami, Junbish-e Milli and Hezb-e Wahdat – met at the village of Khin Jan on 10 October and formed the Supreme Council for the Defence of the Motherland, later transformed to the United Front.⁵

The days following the withdrawal of Massoud's units from Kabul also brought an end to the government air force as a relatively well-equipped service capable of combat operations. When the Taliban conquered Bagram AB, they captured nearly all government air assets including the last operational fighter jets, leaving Massoud with only a few helicopters and transport aircraft scattered around north-eastern Afghanistan. The number of aircraft captured by the Taliban at Bagram remains unknown, as is their operational status at that time. The government certainly had several dozen airframes at its disposal but probably only a small number of them were airworthy by the time the Taliban seized the airport.

There are two possible reasons why the aircraft had not been evacuated from Bagram before the Taliban came: the first is the sheer speed of the Taliban advance that was so surprising that troops and airport personnel simply fled without trying to fly out – or at least destroy or sabotage – the aircraft. One source even stated that government pilots still present at the base were more interested in securing their money before fleeing than in sabotaging or evacuating the aircraft. The alternative explanation might have been Massoud's reluctance to give the jets to Dostum. In late 1996, only two airports suitable for fighter jets remained outside the Taliban territory and both of them were controlled by Dostum. With the Taliban at the gates of Bagram, Massoud allegedly decided to leave the aircraft at the base instead of transferring them to the north and placing them under Dostum's command.⁶ It is important to note that at the time of the Taliban's conquest of Bagram, Dostum's true stance and future actions were still not clear and he could not be considered a 'natural anti-Taliban ally' of Massoud, as he was often presented in the media in later stages of the war. Moreover, Massoud really disliked Dostum because of the 1994 betrayal and despite creating an alliance, the only reason leading to the cooperation of these two strongmen was the threat of the Taliban.

In the fighting north of Kabul in October, the deployment of at least two Mi-24 helicopters by the Taliban was documented for the first time. It is not known if the machines had been captured already in 1995 during the Herat campaign or later, however, they were used intensively in offensives north of Kabul in 1996, wearing no markings. They were operating not only from Kabul but also from Bagram:

according to available photos, the Taliban began using this airport immediately after its capture in the role of a forward helicopter base. There is no information though about any combat sorties performed by captured jets or about the deployment of any Taliban air assets other than helicopters to Bagram in this period. As the air base was under a constant threat of shelling by Massoud's BM-21s and artillery, its actual value was rather limited. Indeed, already on 18 October, Bagram was recaptured by forces of Massoud and Dostum, who finally entered the war by the side of Jamiat-e Islami. In the course of the major offensive, the Taliban lost almost the entire area it had captured north of Kabul and sustained hundreds of dead. Massoud's forces even started shelling Kabul airport and Dostum's Su-22s started bombing targets in the capital.⁷ One jet, probably a Su-22, was shot down by Taliban ground fire north of Kabul on 31 October 1996. Meanwhile, the Taliban transferred some of its MiG-21s and Su-22s from Kandahar and Shindand to Kabul to serve in the close air support role.

The final months of 1996 saw intensive combat in areas north of Kabul. Both sides were fighting for Bagram, the Salang Tunnel and the towns of Charikar, Jabal-us-Saraj, Gulbahar and other strategically important settlements in the area. In the subsequent months and years these locations changed hands several times but neither the Taliban nor Massoud achieved a decisive victory that would have altered the overall strategic situation. The Taliban's ultimate goal was securing the entire area; after which they could have launched an invasion into the Panjshir Valley that had been Massoud's stronghold from the very beginning of the anti-Soviet jihad. Every attempt of the Taliban to fight their way into the valley eventually failed though and Massoud's forces held the Panjshir up until the US-led invasion in 2001.

Iran, fearful of an Afghanistan ruled by a radical Sunni movement supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, meanwhile intensified its support for the anti-Taliban forces. In October 1996, while fighting raged on the Shamali plains north of Kabul, Iran re-armed and re-equipped Ismail Khan's men that had fled from Herat in 1995 and allowed them back to Afghanistan. In this operation, Dostum's An-32s were of crucial importance as they airlifted 2,000 of Khan's fighters from across the Iranian border to the town of Maynama, the capital of the north-western province of Faryab. From here, the followers of the former Emir of Herat went to the province of Badghis further west, where the Taliban had just launched an offensive against Dostum.

The last weeks of the year saw intensive combat deployment of Dostum's air force. On 15 November, Dostum's fighter jets attacked the city of Herat and Shindand air base, trying to inflict damage on the Taliban aircraft on the ground though the results of these aerial raids remain unclear. Seven days later, on 22 November, one of Dostum's jets was shot down by a Taliban MiG-21 during fighting in Badghis province. On the 29th of the same month, Dostum's aircraft bombed Kabul again.

In early December 1996, Taliban pilots managed to score another successful intercept of a passenger plane. This time, their catch was a UN-chartered aircraft en route from Iran to northern Afghanistan carrying the leader of the Tajik anti-government opposition Sayid Abdullah Nuri for peace negotiations with Tajik president Imomali Rakhmonov. The aircraft was forced to land at Shindand air base and released only after the Taliban had inspected its passengers, reportedly searching for Burhanuddin Rabbani who they thought might have been on board.⁸

In the last days of December 1996, the Taliban launched a new offensive aimed at recapturing the Shamali plains north of Kabul that their enemies had seized in October. As a result of the offensive, Massoud suffered a major setback when the Taliban managed to

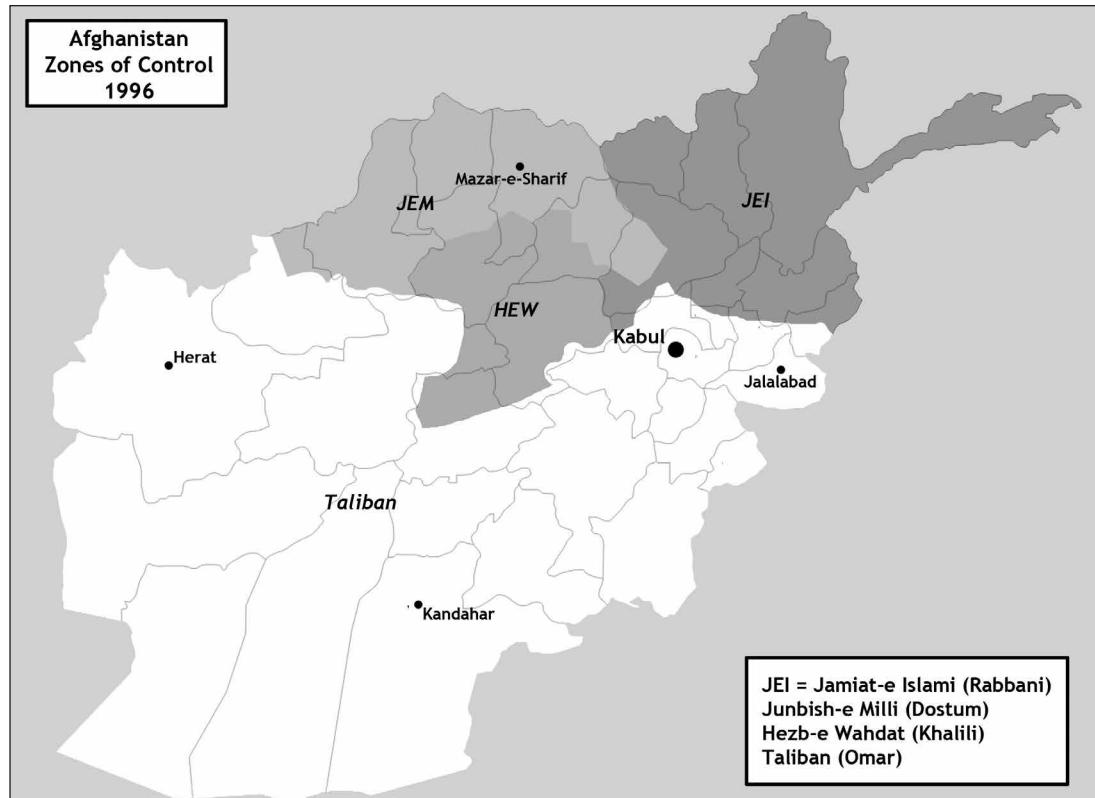
evict his forces from Bagram and Charikar in the middle of January 1997, recapturing the entire area up to the Panjshir and Salang, but unable to overcome opposition forces defending these places. The actions of the sole remaining anti-Taliban air force equipped with fighter jets – that of General Dostum – could not change the course of the events on the ground and occasional bombing raids only resulted in the killing of civilians. An example of such indiscriminate bombardment of civilian targets is the attack on 5 January when two of Dostum's Su-22s dropped their bombs on Kabul, reportedly killing seven and wounding dozens more, destroying several houses including the office of the United Nations World Health Organisation in the process.⁹

Defeating Massoud in Bagram, Taliban columns also turned from the battlefields north of Kabul to the Ghorband Valley which leads to the lands of Hazarajat, an area in central Afghanistan inhabited by Shi'ite Hazaras and mostly ruled by Hezb-e Wahdat. The Taliban attempt to break into the valley was thwarted, however, and the situation on the frontlines north of Kabul soon turned into a stalemate.

Struggling Air Forces

By late 1996, the number of Afghan air forces that had the capacity to perform combat operations was reduced to three: Dostum's, the Taliban's and the ousted government's. The barely functioning air arm of Kandahari commander Mulla Naqibullah was long gone, as were the small air arm of Hezb-e Islami and the more capable air force of Ismail Khan, although a few of his transport helicopters continued serving in the mountains of north-western Afghanistan. The victorious Taliban took over equipment of all these air establishments and started building its own air force which in the course of two years grew in numbers, although precise information regarding aircraft and personnel in this period is not available. It is certain that the core fighting force was represented by MiG-21s that the movement had captured at Kandahar, and also by Su-17s and Su-22s which had been captured at Shindand and Herat during the summer of 1995. Transport duties were served by Antonov aircraft and Mi-8 and Mi-17 helicopters and the movement also had a few Mi-24 attack helicopters at its disposal. The main air bases from which the Taliban air force operated were Kandahar, Shindand and Herat, while there were more secondary airstrips in the areas under the Taliban's rule that could be used by transport planes. Bagram AB was too close to the frontline to be of any use and Kabul served as a temporary base for a few fighter jets conducting air raids against Massoud's forces during operations north of Kabul.

After the Taliban's capture of Bagram, what was left of the Government air force was reduced to a small number of Mi-17 and Mi-24 helicopters and a few Antonov transport planes. The helicopters'



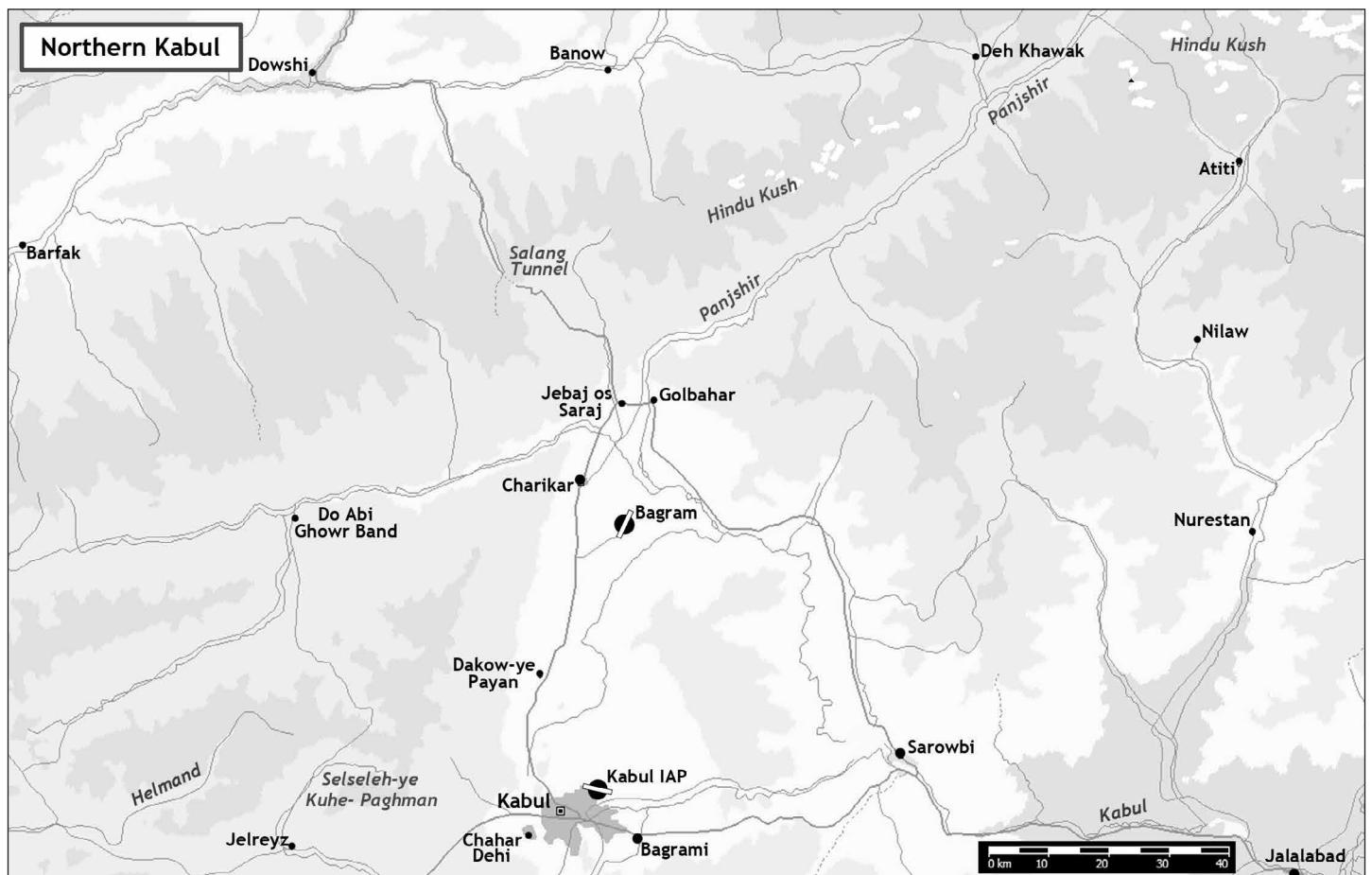
A map of zones of control in Afghanistan as of 1996, by when much of the country – including Kabul – fell under the Taliban. (Map by Tom Cooper)

new base was established in the Panjshir Valley, where a huge stock of ammunition and various support equipment were transferred, presumably from Bagram. Conditions in which the helicopters operated were absolutely rudimentary: there were no paved landing zones, almost no buildings and all the ammunition, spare parts and equipment were stored in the open, with rocket pods lying around in the grass. The only airstrip with paved surface left in the hands of the Rabbani government – which continued to be recognised by the UN as the legitimate representative of Afghanistan – was in Fayzabad, the capital of the north-eastern province of Badakhshan. In fact, the airstrip outside the town was in disarray, lacking facilities of any kind, with the small airport tower heavily damaged a long time ago. In the Panjshir Valley, Afghan mechanics continued to keep the helicopters airworthy against all odds and to much praise of the military leaders: in the mountainous terrain of north-eastern Afghanistan where the road network was in a poor state – and in many areas simply non-existent – transport helicopters played an essential role in resupplying forces on the frontlines.

Attrition in all Afghan air forces was heavy, especially in Junbish that had suffered a lot of combat losses and defections during the 1994 anti-government campaign. However, all three air forces faced similar problems with lack of spare parts which led to cannibalisation of otherwise serviceable aircraft. As there was no infrastructure or skilled personnel able to overhaul the machines, they were kept in operation even when they were in poor technical state and unsafe to fly. Minor repairs were carried out at all air bases and repainting the aircraft with new camouflage colours was commonplace: while there were still many machines flying in their original colours, many others were repainted with any paints available and standardization was almost non-existent.

Malik's Mutiny

At the end of April 1997, a traditional military parade was held in Mazar-e Sharif. The Junbish air force took part in this show of power,



A map of the Kabul area, with Bagram and the Salang Pass and Tunnel to the north, and Jalalabad in the east. (Map by Tom Cooper)

presenting jets together with Mi-8, Mi-17, and Mi-24 helicopters. On the ground, two huge Scud missile launchers and dozens of tanks and infantry fighting vehicles were rumbling the streets of the city. For foreign visitors, and maybe even for Dostum himself, everything seemed to be normal and there were no signs of the upcoming radical shift of power that was to turn the northern provinces and cities that had mostly been spared of the chaos of the civil war into a brutal battlefield only days later.

On 19 May 1997, the 511th Division under the command of Abdul Malik Pahlawan, based in the province of Faryab, mutinied against Dostum and let the Taliban militia through the western frontlines of Badghis. Malik's forces gained momentum and quickly captured and disarmed thousands of Dostum's loyalists. During a further advance, Malik's units met little resistance as they were joined by many commanders of Dostum's army that changed sides. In this phase of the fighting, Taliban units were following Malik's troops but reportedly did not take a major part in the operation that was actually an intra-Junbish coup. Troops that were still loyal to Dostum could not bear the brunt of Malik's attack and on 23 May withdrew from their main base of Sheberghan towards Mazar-e Sharif. During this fight, Dostum's fleet of helicopters proved invaluable when one of them evacuated the general, known through his career for his personal presence on battlefields, just moments before he could have been captured by his opponents.

Not all of Dostum's air force personnel remained loyal to him though. In the chaos that was engulfing the city of Sheberghan, three of his most experienced airmen decided to change sides and instead of attacking Malik or the Taliban, they took their jets to bases controlled by the enemy, allegedly strafing Dostum's own troops in the process. The air force chief General Abdul Jamil and another pilot

landed with their fighter jets at the airstrip in Maymana, the capital of Faryab province, and joined Malik. The third pilot, General Yousuf Shah, landed his L-39 in Kabul, joining the Taliban. In an interview, he stated that after the defections, Dostum had been left with fewer than 10 jets.¹⁰ On the same day, a Mi-17 helicopter crew defected as well, bringing their machine to the enemy.

Malik's motives for cooperation with the Taliban and launching the anti-Dostum coup could be traced back to 1996, when his step-brother Rasul Pahlawan had been gunned down by one of his bodyguards. Rasul Pahlawan who grew from a 1980s mujahideen leader into the undisputed ruler of Faryab province and one of Dostum's most influential vassals was in the mid-1990s showing strong signs of independence and might have been aiming to replace Dostum as the head of the Junbish party. Malik, as well as many others blamed Dostum for Rasul's death, although any hard evidence indicating that the assassination had been ordered by Dostum never materialised. In 1997, Malik's contacts with the Taliban resulted in an agreement according to which he would rise against Dostum, let the Taliban through and get a high position within the Taliban administration, while enjoying autonomy in the north. Malik, although himself an intellectual with no military background, managed to win the support of Faryab commanders using accusations of Dostum's involvement in the death of much more respected Rasul Pahlawan.

By the time the events started unfolding, the Junbish military structure was in such a defunct state that many of Dostum's high-ranking commanders were not willing to fight, rather focusing on securing their influence and possessions they had accumulated during previous years. Although there were still numerically strong forces who stood behind Dostum, their morale was low and the initiative definitely was not on their side. Negligible salaries of rank-and-file



Although nominally a part of Dostum's military organisation, 511th Division – armed with a wide variety of heavy weapons, including BMP-2 IFVs depicted here – was under the command of Dostum's vasal (and rival) Mohammad Rasul Pahlawan. When Pahlawan was assassinated by one of his bodyguards, his step-brother Abdul Malik took over the command and in 1997 revolted against Dostum. (Mark Lepko Collection)

troops that were normally paid months late did not help to raise their morale either. As a consequence, Mazar-e Sharif was captured by Malik's forces on 25 May almost without any fight, as there were no organised forces willing to defend it. General Dostum had to flee to Uzbekistan by car which he managed to do only at the last possible moment; some sources say that he even had to pay for free passage through the checkpoints manned by his own troops.

Thus, in a matter of days, Dostum's so far relatively stable fiefdom was overrun by the combined forces of Malik and the Taliban. Two of the most important northern air bases, Sheberghan and Mazar-e Sharif, did not suffer any damage in the fighting because Dostum's units had simply abandoned them and the aircraft that were based there survived the events unharmed, forming Malik's new air arm.

Intra-Junbish fighting also brought an end to Ismail Khan's effort to return to the scene. After Malik's rise against Dostum, General Abdul Majid Rouzi, one of Dostum's top-ranking commanders, decided to cooperate with Malik and swiftly surrounded and disarmed Ismail Khan's force of several hundred men. Rouzi even managed to arrest Khan, handing him over to the Taliban as a gesture of goodwill shortly after. It probably was around that time when the last remnants of Ismail Khan's air force, consisting of a few transport helicopters, ceased to exist, lacking any bases and support. After Rouzi's betrayal, Ismail Khan went to prison in Kandahar from which he would escape three years later, only to find sanctuary in Iran again.

Abdul Malik Pahlawan, who de facto became the head of Junbish, let several thousand of the Taliban forces into Mazar-e Sharif. Here, against Malik's expectations, the Pashtun Taliban fighters started to act like occupiers, not allies. Immediately after arrival, they began disarming Malik's Uzbek troops and the Hazara militiamen present in the city, closed girls' schools and the Balkh University and started imposing Sharia law. Indeed, instead of guarantors of peace they were soon viewed as foes by not only the civilian population but also by a growing number of Junbish troops and, perhaps more importantly, by Shi'ite Hazara fighters. The Taliban also alienated Malik when instead of a promised high-ranking government post they offered him the

position of a Deputy Foreign Minister, a far less prestigious role than he had probably been expecting.

At the same time, when the Taliban convoys arrived in Mazar from the western frontlines of Badghis, the movement managed to lure Commander Salangi to its side, a crucial leader who paid allegiance to Massoud. Salangi, who by 1997 controlled the northern side of the Salang Tunnel, unexpectedly switched sides – probably after accepting a bribe – and let the Taliban through the tunnel, enabling them to send additional forces from Kabul to the north. The mostly unprepared units of General Naderi and other commanders north of the Salang Tunnel retreated to side valleys, allowing the Taliban to occupy the regional centre of Pul-e Khumri. The Taliban

advance now seemed unstoppable and for many, the movement was close to a decisive victory over all Afghan factions – a view which was strengthened when Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates gave the movement that renamed the country as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan diplomatic recognition.

The timing and intensity with which the Taliban units on the ground were supplied by the air force – that from this moment could be called the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Air Force (IEAAF) – was such that much speculation appeared in the media about the possible involvement of PAF personnel in the operations. The main reason for such rumours were Taliban Antonovs loaded with ammunition, food, and drinking water that began appearing at airports only hours after the Taliban and Malik's forces had captured them. Although the participation of PAF airmen cannot be absolutely ruled out, making timely supply flights to airports close to the frontlines was nothing that the Afghan crews could not achieve on their own, especially given their experience with landings under the most difficult conditions at Jalalabad, Khost, and other airports under fire in the 1980s.

However, what for a few days seemed to be the greatest Taliban victory since the eviction of the Rabbani government from Kabul ended in a complete rout and an unprecedented massacre of Taliban fighters. The debacle started unfolding on 27 May when a group of Hazara militiamen in Mazar-e Sharif resisted being disarmed. This event sparked a large uprising of local Hezb-e Wahdat militiamen and armed Hazara civilians who turned on the Taliban, who were strangers in the city, and were not able to set up any defensive lines. Malik's Uzbeks soon joined the Hazaras and despite desperate efforts by Malik and the Pakistanis to stop the fighting, Mazar-e Sharif was soon engulfed in chaotic street battles. Hundreds of Taliban were killed in ambushes and as many as 1,000, including at least five pilots, were captured at the airport where they had probably been waiting for evacuation by Taliban aircraft.¹¹ In this situation, Malik unexpectedly changed sides and began to act as the anti-Taliban leader of Junbish. His forces regained control in the provinces of Jowzjan, Sar-e Pul, and Faryab and with the help of Hezb-e Wahdat managed to capture thousands of

Taliban combatants who found themselves trapped in the north, with their escape routes cut off by enemies. Many high-ranking Taliban commanders who had overconfidently gone to the north were captured as well, including the acting foreign minister. In the following days, a slaughter of Taliban captives took place when as many as 3,000 Afghan and Pakistani Taliban members were massacred by Malik's troops, while thousands more were kept prisoner, resulting in an acute shortage of manpower for the Islamic movement. During fighting in the north, Iran – in a bid to help the anti-Taliban forces – allegedly delivered 20 loads of ammunition directly to Mazar-e Sharif airport using C-130 transport planes.¹² The IEAAF began flying bombing raids against the northern capital but the occasional, uncoordinated retaliatory attacks had no impact on the events on the ground.

After the spring 1995 defeat outside Shindand, failure in Mazar-e Sharif was the second major setback to the Taliban movement. Again, some commentators were predicting the movement's total defeat, but the Taliban's resources and the determination of the movement's leadership and their Pakistani and Arab patrons proved to be sufficient to replace the losses: in Pakistani madrassas and areas in Afghanistan under Taliban control the movement immediately started a large recruitment campaign that in the following months brought thousands of new fighters into the Taliban ranks.

Taliban Foothold in the North

While after the chaotic defeat around Mazar the western frontline was again established along the Murghab river in the province of Badghis, fighting reigned in provinces of Samangan and Baghlan. Commander Salangi, who had sided with the Taliban, changed sides again when the momentum turned against the Taliban and it became more prudent to return to the anti-Taliban side. Salangi's men who joined Jamiat and Wahdat units present in the area effectively trapped thousands of Taliban north of the Salang Tunnel, cutting off their only route back to Kabul. The Taliban group of approximately 3,000 men had no other option than to continue their advance further north through Baghlan province in what was more a retreat from hostile areas than an offensive. They soon reached the borders of Kunduz province where they were met not by resistance but by friendly forces of Pashtun commanders from Hezb-e Islami, and several less significant parties, who had proclaimed their affiliation to the Taliban just days before upon hearing about the Taliban's successful capture of Mazar. This shift of power in parts of Baghlan and Kunduz apparently



A group of Dostum's Mi-8Ts taking-off somewhere in northern Afghanistan. Most of the top commanders – including Dostum – relied heavily on transport helicopters in order to move around in their areas as they were faster and more convenient than using the poor road network. (Mark Lepko Collection)



Unlike most of Dostum's Mi-8s and Mi-17s, which retained their original camouflage, this example – serial number 549 – was re-painted with patches of sand, dark brown and green. It is possible that it was subsequently captured and pressed into service by the Taliban, because there are photos showing a Taliban Mi-17 wearing the same serial – even if different camouflage pattern. (Mark Lepko Collection)

was a genuine one: Pashtun military commanders together with the local populace actually welcomed the Taliban presence mainly on the grounds of shared ethnic background and the prospects of peace and stability the movement could possibly bring to Kunduz that for years had been plagued by infighting and chaos. Taliban leaders who were now bolstered with the manpower and military hardware of their new allies did not hesitate and continued deeper into Kunduz province, capturing the city of Kunduz and the high plateau with the local airport in the second half of June.¹³ Thus, a Taliban enclave emerged in the north, surrounded by enemies but able to survive thanks to an intensive air bridge that was soon established by the IEAAF. Antonov transport aircraft of the Taliban and Ariana began their daily supply flights from Kabul, bringing ammunition and men and sustaining the enclave up to 1998 when it was reached by victorious Taliban units which again swept through the northern provinces.

The immediate fate of the enclave was far from certain though. By the time of the Taliban's capture of Kunduz, Malik's units were positioned in the west and Massoud's units in the north and east of the city. Massoud especially acted as a threat, launching an offensive aimed at evicting the Taliban from the city. The attack was repulsed, however, and the Taliban even conducted a bold counterattack that breached the Jamiat-e Islami lines and reached the outskirts of the strategically important city of Taloqan, the capital of Takhar province, where some of the United Front leaders had established their headquarters.¹⁴ The panic on the ground reached such an extent that the ousted president Burhanuddin Rabbani fled the city in a helicopter, fearing for his life.

The Taliban's advance was short-lived, however, and the situation soon turned in Massoud's favour: Jamiat forces performed a strong counter-attack and pushed the Islamist movement's fighters back to Kunduz city, even capturing some suburbs in the process. IEAAF jets operating from Kabul pounded the attackers with bombs and after an important United Front commander switched sides to the Taliban, the situation around the city reached a stalemate, although both the Taliban and their enemies performed offensives and counterattacks and the overall situation in Kunduz was far from quiet.

Disunited Opposition

On 13 June 1997, anti-Taliban parties founded the United Islamic and National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan – later colloquially known as the United Front, the Northern Alliance or the Northern Coalition – and proclaimed Mazar-e Sharif its capital. In reality, though, the United Front was anything but united: its only reason for existence was the immediate threat represented by the Taliban movement and nothing could overcome a deep, continuing distrust among United Front leaders. In Mazar-e Sharif especially, and some other areas in the province of Balkh, there were repeated occasions of merciless infighting among Jamiat, Wahdat, and Dostum's and Malik's factions of Junbish. Despite providing a decent façade of a common approach against the Taliban, in military terms the United Front rarely reached agreement that would have resulted in a meaningful coordination in the field. It is not surprising that none of the United Front leaders ever came up with the idea of creating a single, truly united air force at all. Instead, every group continued to maintain a small air arm of its own. Despite mutual conflicts, in June 1997 unification of the opposition forces – however superficial – was the only viable alternative to their fragmentation and decline under continuing pressure of the Taliban. Massoud and Rabbani were glad to have Uzbek forces led by Malik on their side, although there was common distrust towards the treacherous leader who had switched sides twice within just a few days: this was simply 'too much' even by Afghan standards.

In the first half of August 1997, political negotiations among the United Front leaders resulted in the appointment of Abdul Rahim Ghafoorzai, a skilled Pashtun technocrat with no military background who had represented the official Afghan government led by Rabbani at the UN, as the prime minister. This step should have reduced criticism that the ousted government dominated by Tajiks effectively excluded Pashtuns from all important positions within the state apparatus. The course of events did not allow Ghafoorzai to show his skills in his new role though: on 21 August 1997, as he was travelling on board of an An-32 to the city of Bamiyan to lead talks with local representatives, he was killed when the machine overshot the runway of Bamiyan's airstrip and crashed, killing almost all passengers on board. No serious investigation into the cause of the accident was ever attempted.

After the Mazar debacle, the Taliban were demoralised and their fighting capabilities suffered a serious setback. Both Massoud and the Hazaras made use of this opportunity and broke the Taliban lines north of Kabul: while Hezb-e Wahdat evicted the Taliban from the Ghorband Valley, opening the important land route to Massoud's territories, Massoud launched a large-scale offensive from his bases in the Panjshir and within a few days his Tajik forces recaptured not only Jabal-us-Saraj and Charikar, but also Bagram AB. Thus, by the middle of July 1997, the Taliban were again pushed back to the outskirts of Kabul.

Massoud and Wahdat were not the only forces capable of surprising military actions though: the Taliban, after a period of rest, could do precisely the same. Four months after they had been evicted from



The rear part of An-32 serial number 352, that belonged to Massoud, that crashed in Bamiyan in August 1997. (Mark Lepko Collection)



Most of the An-32s delivered to Afghanistan received a camouflage pattern consisting of sand, green, and dark green colours. This example survived in service with Massoud's forces long enough to perform supply flights to north-western Afghanistan from Massoud's supply bases in Tajikistan. (Mark Lepko Collection)

Mazar-e Sharif, the Taliban made a new attempt on the city, using the enclave in Kunduz as a launching pad for their new offensive. Making use of the fact that the province of Balkh – of which Mazar-e Sharif is the capital – remained divided between mutually hostile United Front parties, the Taliban quickly reached the town of Tashqurgan lying halfway to Mazar-e Sharif, on 7 September 1997. As a result, chaos and panic broke out in the opposition's capital that was desperately in need of a strong force to provide help. On 9 September, the Taliban reached the city, briefly capturing some neighbourhoods and even the airport where several of Malik's aircraft were stationed. Apparently in fear of further Taliban advances, Malik ordered his pilots at Sheberghan to fly his remaining fighter jets to Kulob airport in southern Tajikistan. While eight pilots followed the orders, three defected to the Taliban: two landed at Herat airport and one at Shindand. The following day, on 10 September, the Taliban leader Mohammad Omar warned Tajikistan not to harbour opposition aircraft and called for their return. Taliban fears of Tajikistan's support for the United Front proved to be justified only a day later when at least two jets apparently operating from Kulob attacked Taliban targets east of Mazar-e Sharif.

Eventually, in the chaotic situation on the ground, it was General Dostum who after coming back from Turkey rallied Junbish commanders that were dissatisfied with Malik and rushed to Mazar-e Sharif to strengthen the city's defences against the Taliban. At the same time, he turned on Malik and soon Mazar-e Sharif was engulfed in heavy battles not only between the United Front and the Taliban but also between the two leaders of Junbish.



Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of the Hezb-e Islami Party, moments before boarding an An-32 belonging to Massoud. Although Hekmatyar joined the Rabbani/Massoud government in 1996, and spent some time under their protection in north-western Afghanistan, he later left the country and emigrated to Iran. (Mark Lepko Collection)



Hazara fighters with one of the ubiquitous ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft guns. (Mark Lepko Collection)

Later in September, the Taliban changed their tactics and instead of trying to defeat their enemies in Mazar, they attempted to cut their supply lines by attacking the town of Hairatan on the border with Uzbekistan. This move forced Dostum and Malik to briefly cooperate and in a few days of intense fighting, they forced the Taliban from the strategically important border town.¹⁵

Eventually, militias of Junbish, Jamiat and Wahdat pushed the Taliban back to their enclave in Kunduz in early October. For the population of Mazar-e Sharif though, the United Front victory only brought more suffering: the city became a scene of fierce fighting between Dostum, Malik, Jamiat-e Islami, and mutually hostile factions of Hezb-e Wahdat. After a period of chaos, Hezb-e Wahdat – although still fragmented – emerged as the dominant force in Mazar while Dostum forced Malik back to his home province of Faryab and re-established himself in his stronghold of Sheberghan. Malik's short-lived air force effectively ceased to exist as the Sheberghan AB came under Dostum's control again and the only aircraft left on Malik's territory in Faryab were a few transport helicopters.

The last months of 1997 were characterised by further rounds of infighting among the United Front parties, while the Taliban did not launch any major offensive. The most important shift of power occurred in the province of Faryab, where Dostum finally defeated Malik's loyalists and by December 1997 crushed the last remnants of the opposition within Junbish. Abdul Malik Pahlawan, with his closest associates and their families, escaped from his base by helicopter, flying over the border to Turkmenistan.¹⁶

Getting rid of Malik, Dostum's attention shifted to the province of Samangan, where vast areas were dominated by allies of General Naderi. Although Naderi and his vassals had been incorporated into Dostum's Junbish party already in the early 1990s, now they turned Dostum's enemies: when Malik had revolted in May, Naderi declared support for him and turned away from Dostum.¹⁷ In retaliation, Dostum defeated Naderi's commanders in Samangan but refrained from any further incursion into Naderi's home area in the province of Baghlan, probably lacking resources for such an expedition.

After Malik's escape to Turkmenistan, Junbish military leaders reunited their forces under Dostum's command. The Uzbek General established himself as the ruler of provinces of Faryab, Jowzjan and Sar-e Pul but could not fully reclaim the city of Mazar-e Sharif where his units faced those of Wahdat. However, even if Junbish again acted as a single force, the damage was done: the party never again reached



This was one of the Mi-8/17 helicopters operated by Massoud's forces for transporting supplies from Tajikistan to the United Front bases in north-eastern Afghanistan during the second half of the 1990s. Carrying a black serial 746, it was photographed at what was probably a buzkashi field in the northern town of Taloqan in 1998. Notable is the emergency exit door, on the left side of the cabin, replaced by a sheet of metal. (Photo by Tomáš Vlach)



A port side-view of the same helicopter revealing details of its markings and the fact that the cabin door on that side was a replacement salvaged from another helicopter. Notable is the installation of chaff and flare dispenser on the boom; by the time this photograph was taken, this was no longer functional and most of it had been removed. (Photo by Tomáš Vlach)

its former strength and true loyalties of many commanders were doubtful.

The turmoil that engulfed northern Afghanistan meant that by the end of 1997 the once mighty Junbish air force was only a shadow of its former strength. At least a few fighter jets that had escaped to Tajikistan following Malik's orders apparently flew back to Afghanistan, as photos taken in 1998 show airworthy MiGs and Sukhois at Sheberghan and Mazar-e Sharif airports. It is also possible that some of the fighter jets in question never left their bases and survived the fighting until Dostum once again regained control over the sites. Due to the lack of fuel though, the remaining jets were rarely flown as the scarce resources were used to operate much more needed transport helicopters instead.

Hezb-e Wahdat's Air Arm

For the Shi'a party, the fighting of 1997 brought a considerable rise in its power. After its defeat by Massoud in western Kabul in March 1995, Hezb-e Wahdat restricted itself primarily to the central province of Bamiyan and surrounding areas inhabited by Hazaras. The failed

Taliban attempt on Mazar-e Sharif in May 1997 and the subsequent decline of Junbish's potential provided Hezb-e Wahdat with an opportunity to seize power in many areas of the northern province of Balkh and also in Mazar-e Sharif itself. Within a few weeks, the status of the party rose from that of the weaker ally of Junbish to Junbish's more equal partner or even the enemy, at least in military if not political sense.

Although precise circumstances are yet to be determined, after the Taliban's defeat in Mazar Hezb-e Wahdat probably briefly occupied the airport and began utilizing at least one Antonov An-26 transport aircraft and one Mi-8 helicopter. However, the possibility that these machines had already been obtained from Junbish or from some other source before the dramatic events in Mazar took place cannot be ruled out. What is certain, however, is that Bamiyan airport became relatively busy as Iran intensified military support for its Shi'a protégé. The airport was utilised not only by Iranian C-130s and the transport aircraft of Wahdat, Jamiat, and Junbish but also by a newly established Bamiyan Air that operated a single Fairchild-Hiller FH-227E (an American license-built version of Fokker F-27) in civilian livery which originated from Honduras and which was flown by an Argentine pilot on behalf of Wahdat. Maintenance of this rather exotic aircraft was probably provided by Iran. Iranian and United Front transport aircraft were also utilizing a gravel landing strip outside



Two stills from a video showing the sole Fairchild-Hiller FH-227E, a licence-built Fokker F.27, operated by Hezb-e Wahdat's Bamiyan Air. (for a reconstruction of this aircraft, see the colour section). (Mark Lepko Collection)



A still from a video showing An-26 serial 250 moments after landing at Bamiyan in 1997. The 'national marking' of this aircraft consisted of what seems to have been the former communist roundel, with the red star painted over with white. It remains unclear if this machine belonged to Hezb-e Wahdat or some other party. (Mark Lepko Collection)

the remote town of Yakawlang that lies even deeper in the mountain range west of Bamiyan. Obviously, air traffic over central Afghanistan could not be hidden from the Taliban and they began air raids against the airstrips, effectively preventing UN aircraft from delivering the much-needed aid to Hazarajat where thousands of civilians were on the brink of starvation due to harsh weather and roads blocked by the Taliban. On one occasion, a bomb dropped by a Taliban fighter jet only narrowly missed a UN aircraft that had landed just moments before the attack. Despite the UN protests, Taliban bombing raids continued: the movement said it considered Bamiyan airport a legitimate target because the opposition was using it for military purposes, which, in fact, was absolutely true.¹⁸ In August 1998, a mere month before the Taliban's conquest of Bamiyan, the Iranians equipped the local airport with lights so that it could be used for night landings, indicating the seriousness with which Iran took its role in resupplying its Afghan ally.¹⁹

The Second Fall of Mazar

As was already noted, since September 1997 Malik's and Dostum's factions of Junbish and Wahdat forces repeatedly engaged in frequent clashes in the northern capital. Russian and Iranian agents present in Mazar tried to negotiate between them but without success. In February 1998, a full-scale battle over the city erupted between Junbish, that by that time was again under Dostum's command, and Hezb-e Wahdat whose leaders clearly underestimated the threat of the Taliban. The fighting in Mazar was so serious that Ahmad Shah Massoud personally flew to Teheran in an attempt to save the United Front. The intensity of fighting eventually declined but the mutual distrust between Uzbeks and Hazaras as well as the fact that Wahdat itself continued to be fragmented into several mutually hostile factions hampered any hopes of unified action against the Taliban that after the debacle it had suffered last year managed to regroup, replenish human losses, and launch a fresh offensive in the province of Badghis.

On 12 June 1998 Taliban columns reached Maymana, which they seized, capturing 800 Junbish troops and dozens of tanks in the process. Then, the Taliban continued further north-east to the province of Jowzjan, the centre of Dostum's fiefdom. Meanwhile in the province of Samangan, Jamiat commander Atta Mohammad Nur, whom Dostum forced out of Mazar-e Sharif in January 1994, attacked Junbish troops. Indeed, the United Front could not have been more dysfunctional: while Dostum was leading his men on western frontlines and trying to block the advancing Taliban, Junbish, Hezb-e Wahdat, and Atta's Tajik militias were clashing in his backyard. As the situation deteriorated, Iranian C-130s started delivering small arms and ammunition to Mazar-e Sharif but it was too late. After a few weeks of intensive Taliban attacks, the defence lines of Junbish forces

in the north-west began to crumble – in part because the Taliban managed to bribe some of Dostum's commanders – and on 1 August, the Taliban breached into Sheberghan, captured the airport, overran Dostum's headquarters, and made the Uzbek leader flee the scene altogether. Maybe out of fear of betrayal by his commanders, maybe because Mazar was partly in the hands of Wahdat and definitely not secure, Dostum did not withdraw to safer areas with his troops but fled to Uzbekistan from where he proceeded further to Turkey.²⁰ This act certainly did not serve as a morale boost to his units. Junbish commanders along the main road to Mazar started accepting bribes from the Taliban en masse and within days the Uzbek front effectively disintegrated while local Pashtun militias affiliated to Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami defected from the United Front and joined the Taliban.

As Uzbek units were fleeing or indifferent, the only remaining force determined to defend Mazar-e Sharif were Shi'a Wahdat fighters. This time however, they had no chance to push the enemy out: the Taliban was much more cautious in their advance and Wahdat units of 1,500-3,000 fighters soon found themselves trapped outside the city, encircled from all sides. The ensuing battle was soon over: most of the Shi'a were killed, a few hundred reportedly managed to flee the scene in their pick-up trucks, while their top commanders – including Mohammad Mohaqiq, the leader of Hezb-e Wahdat in the north – escaped in a helicopter. In an act of revenge for the massacre of thousands of Taliban militiamen in 1997, in conquered Mazar-e Sharif the Taliban started a killing spree that lasted several days and during which 2,000-8,000 civilians – mostly Hazaras – were murdered.



Mi-8T serial number 657 flying over a parade in Bamiyan held in the summer of 1998. Hundreds of Hezb-e Wahdat combatants were sent to the north to assist in the defence of Mazar-e Sharif – only to be surrounded and slaughtered by the Taliban in early August 1998. (Mark Lepko Collection)



A typical view of Bagram AB after it changed hands several times. Dozens of derelict airframes litter much of the space surrounding the runway. (US DoD)



Shindand AB offered a similar scene to that at Bagram: countless Su-7 and Il-28s – and a few An-12s, MiG-21s, Su-22s, and at least one of the Soviet-operated Mi-6s – were scattered around, most showing scars from several rounds of fighting and long-time neglect. Notable here are the Su-22M-3 serial number 840 and Su-17M serial number 883. In the lower right corner the fin can be seen of MiG-21bis serial number 823 which is known to have served with the Taliban AF, before being captured and overhauled by Ismail Khan's forces. (US DoD)

When the Taliban forces entered Mazar-e Sharif, a group of renegade Pakistani fighters that reportedly acted without orders from Taliban commanders murdered 10 Iranian diplomats and a journalist.²¹ This incident caused a serious crisis between the Taliban and Iran and threatened to escalate into an open war. Iran amassed more than 200,000 troops along the Afghan border and the IRIAA deployed one of its Aviation Groups into the area, while the IRIAF also deployed F-14s and Mirage F-1s at Zahedan and Mashhad.²² The Taliban started amassing their forces along the border in response. Soon, both sides launched military manoeuvres that, however, did not deteriorate into anything worse than a few border skirmishes. Eventually, mediation by the UN defused the situation and the looming conflict de-escalated into a state of a 'cold war' between Iran and the Taliban.

Apart from the Taliban victory in Mazar and a near-war with Iran, August 1998 brought about one more serious incident: in retaliation for terrorist attacks against US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania which killed 224 people including 12 Americans, four US Navy ships and one submarine stationed in the Arabian Sea launched a salvo of between 60 and 75 Tomahawk cruise missiles against a terrorist camp complex in the province of Khost. Although subsequent investigation revealed that this strike caused relatively minor material and human losses, it remains notable from a historical perspective as it was the first direct US military involvement in Afghanistan since the cessation of aid to the mujahideen, and was the first US military action targeting Osama bin Laden-affiliated terrorist networks. From the first meetings between the Taliban leadership and bin Laden that occurred in the fall of 1996, the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda grew to a state of mutual interdependence: while bin Laden was relatively safe under the protection of the radical movement and could keep on development of his network into a Islamist terrorist organisation unmatched by any other, the Taliban profited from bin Laden's money and his ability to attract into Afghanistan organisations that would later fight alongside the Taliban. At the same time, and largely because of their willingness to harbour international jihadists, the Taliban found themselves more and more isolated on the international scene and in turn even more dependent on bin Laden and his organisation.

Defeat of the Afghan Shi'a

In early September 1998, it was evident that the Taliban were preparing for the decisive assault on the city of Bamiyan: after the Taliban lured on its side eight opposition commanders from the area, the movement's forces flanked the Hazara heartland from the north, east and south. Although Wahdat units put up stiff resistance, the Taliban were slowly but steadily getting close to the city. On 10 September,

Iranian transport aircraft began landing at Bamiyan airstrip to deliver additional supplies and to evacuate Hezb-e Wahdat leaders and Iranian staff from the country's unofficial consulate situated next to the two giant Buddha statues in the city.²³ It soon became clear that despite all efforts of the Hezb-e Wahdat leadership and Iranian allies, the Taliban would be the winner of this battle. The city of Bamiyan fell on 13 September and the town of Yakawlang west of Bamiyan fell a few days later. After the defeat, Wahdat fighters

retreated deeper into the high mountains and narrow valleys, getting ready for guerrilla warfare. Although they lost a conventional battle, rugged terrain enabled them to wage hit and run attacks and they actually continued to hold vast areas of mountainous terrain in the province of Bamiyan and parts of adjacent provinces. Ultimately this only worsened the situation of the civilian population of Hazarajat which the Taliban accused of siding with Wahdat fighters. Losing Bamiyan and Yakawlang also deprived Wahdat of landing strips through which military cargo could be delivered by transport planes.

Typically for the Afghan civil war, a split within the Wahdat ranks made the situation for the Taliban easier: the Wahdat faction led by Akbari – who in 1995 sided with Massoud against the party's leadership that was trying to cooperate with the Taliban – allied itself with the Taliban shortly after the movement's victory in Bamiyan. This development enabled the Taliban to withdraw much-needed forces from the area and use them elsewhere, primarily against Massoud in the province of Takhar, leaving the policing of conquered districts of Bamiyan in Akbari's hands. Only the town of Bamiyan, Yakawlang and a few other important districts were administered directly by the Taliban.

Hezb-e Wahdat forces were not the only Shi'a defenders that retreated in September 1998 under the pressure of the large and seemingly unstoppable Taliban offensive that had gained momentum



One of Massoud's Mi-8MTs that were obtained from Russia in the second half of the 1990s. Massoud used these machines not only for supplying his forces in the Panjshir and other areas in the north-west of the country, but also to deliver weapons to anti-Taliban forces operating in central Afghanistan. (Mark Lepko Collection)

after their victory in Mazar-e-Sharif. The other victim of the Taliban's military machine was the small Isma'ili fiefdom in the province of Baghlan led by Naderi. The relatively prosperous and stable area that had been mostly saved from the surrounding chaos of the 1980s and 1990s civil wars finally fell to the Taliban as well. As did many other top leaders before him who had found themselves in a critical situation, General Naderi evacuated from the Kayan Valley by helicopter while his troops either surrendered or fled deeper into the mountains.

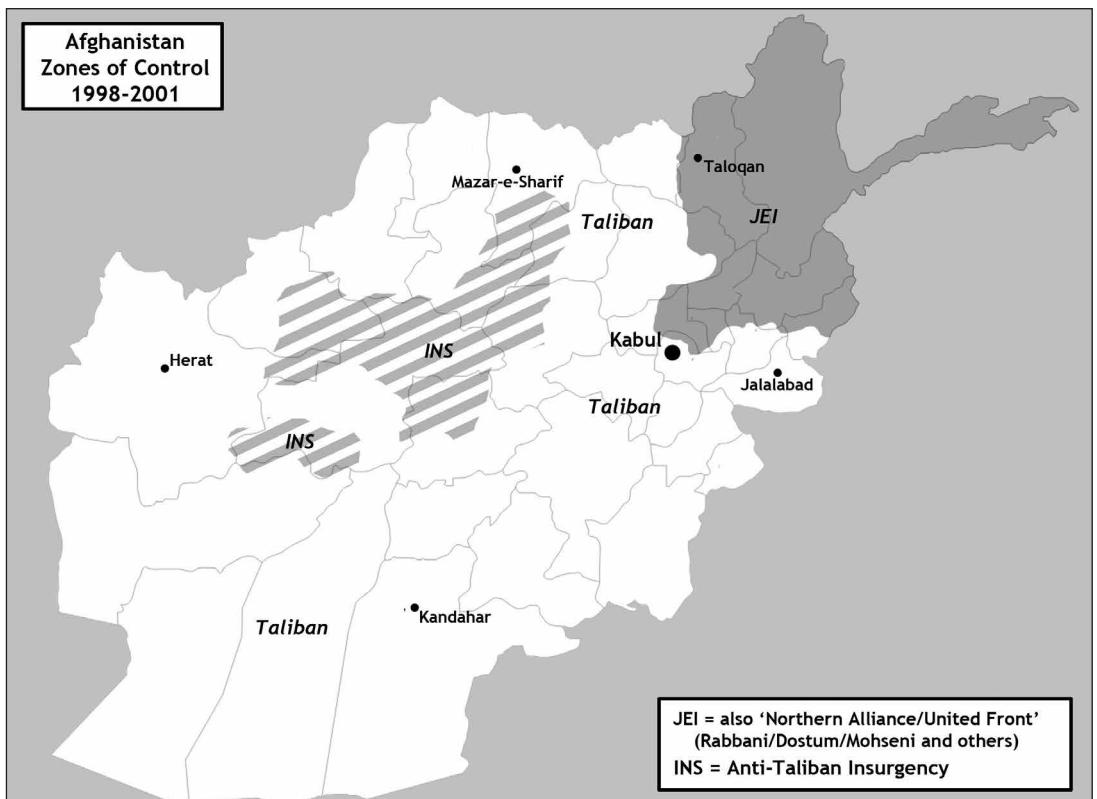
Thus, in the summer of 1998, the strategic situation in Afghanistan completely changed. As happened many times before, the side in the conflict that gained momentum clearly developed the upper hand over its enemies who were soon on a defensive. It did not matter much that the United Front formations had many more armed men in the northern provinces than had the Taliban: it was the Islamic movement who seemed to be winning this battle and as a result, morale among anti-Taliban fighters was low and many of them were soon ready to join the winning side or flee. For the rest of the war, the only party strong enough to resist the Taliban in conventional warfare and control a relatively large territory was Jamiat-e Islami whose military relied on commander Massoud's Shura-e Nazar forces and whose leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani, continued to be recognised by the world community as the legitimate Afghan president.

Guerrilla resistance in Central Afghanistan

The high mountains and deep valleys of the Hindu Kush's western extents that form the landscape in central Afghanistan make a perfect terrain for guerrilla operations. It was here where those United Front commanders who were still willing to resist the Taliban withdrew after they had been defeated in open battle. Throughout the whole period in which the Taliban controlled most of the country except for the Jamiat-dominated north-east, some remote valleys in the centre of the country were never captured by the Taliban despite the movement's



MiG-21bis serial number 308 as found by US troops at Bagram AB in November 2001. As of 1996, this jet was operated by Massoud's forces. (Photo by Santiago Flores)



A map showing the zones of control in Afghanistan as of 1998: by this time, the Taliban had established themselves in control of about 80 percent of the country. Jamiat-e Islami – meanwhile operating under the title of Northern Alliance or United Front, and actually including a wide variety of forces – controlled only the north-east. However, a little-known anti-Taliban insurgency was active in much of the northern central highlands. The Taliban captured Taloqan in the summer of 2000 and by September their zone of control extended to the east of the city. (Map by Tom Cooper)

efforts to do so: especially the district of Balkhab and the valley of Darrya Suf where Khalili's Wahdat faction and Junbish and Jamiat commanders were active turned into theatres of almost relentless military operations that, however, did not crush the opposition's will to fight. Occasionally, groups of fighters even launched daring incursions into the open terrain in the west and north of the country where, however, the Taliban's heavy weapons and airpower clearly dominated.

Occasional resupply of the opposition forces was conducted by either transport aircraft or – more frequently – Massoud's helicopters. General Dostum still had at least one An-32 operational and this aircraft regularly flew between the Iranian city of Mashad and Termez in Uzbekistan, possibly bringing supplies even directly to the Afghan heartland. Iran, according to unverified reports, provided Hezb-e Wahdat with several An-32s that were landing in central Afghanistan at times when Wahdat briefly recaptured any of the local gravel airstrips. Supplies for Jamiat forces poured in through a landing strip in the area of Chaharzada that was controlled by Salam Khan, one of Ismail Khan's commanders. However, Salam joined the Taliban in 2000 after an unwelcomed visit by Ismail Khan who intended to re-establish himself in central Afghanistan and fight the Taliban with the help of his former allies with whom he cooperated at the time of the Herat Emirate. To his surprise, Ismail Khan was practically evicted from the area after an attempt on his life, while the position of the most prominent Jamiat commander in the area continued to be held by Dr Ibrahim who waged guerrilla warfare in the remote valleys of

Ghor and continued to hold the position of Massoud's primary ally in central Afghanistan. Evidently, even in situations like those in western Hindu Kush where anti-Taliban commanders were in a permanent danger of defeat, they were not able to overcome their differences and build an effective and truly coherent, lasting anti-Taliban coalition.

The most successful attempts to recapture lost ground, and even the places of symbolic value, were repeatedly made by the anti-Taliban factions of Hezb-e Wahdat. In late 1998, Yakawlang was recaptured by Khalili's Wahdat supported by militias of Harakat-e Islami, a less influential Shi'a party. Hazaras repeated this success in April 1999 when they defeated the Taliban around Bamiyan and freed the city. For the Taliban, the loss of Bamiyan was the final straw: in a matter of days they launched a large counterattack that not only pushed Wahdat from their unofficial capital but also from Yakawlang, where an additional Taliban unit that arrived from Kandahar by helicopter committed a massacre of civilians. In their offensive, the Taliban was supported by fighter jets conducting bombing raids on Hezb-e Wahdat positions.²⁴

5

FURTHER ADVANCES OF THE TALIBAN AND THEIR SUDDEN FALL, 1999–2001

After crushing the Uzbek and Hazara armies, the Taliban fully turned on Ahmad Shah Massoud who had established frontlines close to the Panjshir and in the north-eastern province of Takhar. Over the years following the successful retreat from Kabul, Massoud turned the long, impenetrable Panjshir Valley into a large military base with improvised landing zones for helicopters, training grounds, repair sites, and ballistic missile storage sites. Missile crews consisting of former communist regime army specialists retreated to the Panjshir together with their machines and conducted regular training. It still remains unknown, however, if any Scud or Frog-7 missiles were actually launched from the valley, although the Taliban accused Massoud of using these weapons against civilian areas of Kabul several times.

The conditions in which the modern weaponry was kept operational were absolutely primitive. For example, the storage vessels for the toxic, explosive fuel for Scud missiles were kept in shallow trenches, exposed to rain, snow and dust, as were the missiles and a vast array of other weapons, including tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and 9P133 (BRDM-2 based) systems equipped with Malyutka (AT-3 Sagger) anti-tank missiles. This contributed to low combat readiness of especially the more complex weapons, many of which were damaged and never returned to operation. Maintenance was

conducted with basic tools, using anything that was available. Many weapons were cannibalised to keep others operational. For example, valued Mi-17 helicopters in need of repair were in many cases put together from several different machines. Replacing a helicopter's boom with that of a damaged or unused aircraft was commonplace not only with Massoud's forces but throughout the country. Several of Massoud's Mi-17s had the emergency exit door replaced with a sheet of metal, apparently after someone actually used the exit in some sort of mishap. In one case, Massoud's technicians fitted an engine from a Mi-24 helicopter into a Mi-17 to the surprise of a CIA team present at Dushanbe airport in Tajikistan where Massoud's machines were serviced.¹ According to Colonel Shafi, a Kabul-based technician who was interviewed by an American military historian, in the 1990s, non-



With no heavy SAMs active in the Panjshir Valley, Massoud's forces at least deployed a wide array of anti-aircraft guns. This 100mm KS-19 air defence gun was photographed in the Panjshir Valley after the fall of the Taliban regime. (US DoD)

Mi-17 engines were sometimes used in Mi-17s to keep the transport helicopters flying.² It is important to note that both Mi-17 and Mi-24 helicopters use the same type of engine but of different versions.

Rather surprisingly, Massoud continued to operate the two Mi-35 helicopters whose crews had defected to his forces in 1989. The machines remained operational with Massoud up to the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, operating from improvised landing sites in the Panjshir, Takhar, and Darkot island in the Panj river, and later were incorporated into the newly established Afghan National Army Air Corps. Apart from these two helicopters, Massoud's forces still had another four Mi-24V/25s that had been evacuated before the Taliban captured Kabul and Bagram in 1996. However, attack helicopters saw relatively little action as the precious fuel was used for operating the much more needed Mi-17s. Especially in the Panjshir, aircraft fuel was a constant issue. The only motorable road connecting the valley with the rest of the ousted government's territories was built only after the Taliban conquered Kabul, but due to the high altitude, rains, and snow, this unpaved road could be used for just several months a year and fuel had to be transported into the valley on donkeys.³ When it reached the site, it was poured into the few TZA refuelling trucks of Soviet origin from which it was pumped into the helicopters.

While under normal circumstances the number of flights to and from the Panjshir was relatively high, bad weather sometimes prevented helicopters from operating for whole weeks. Thus, even top commanders, including Massoud who usually flew on board of his personal Mi-17 (serialled 792), sometimes became stuck in the valley.

In addition to armour and aircraft, Massoud's forces even managed to evacuate some SA-3 SAMs from either Kabul or Bagram into the Panjshir but these missiles were never made operational again after getting dust in their transport containers. No radar was ever transferred to the valley and the only anti-aircraft defence of the Panjshir thus consisted of ZU-23-2, ZPU-1, and other types of anti-aircraft guns situated on mountain peaks around the valley. According to the available information, these never scored any hits. The Taliban



An ex-Taliban ZIL-131 technical carrying a ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft gun, as seen after the fall of the Taliban government. The ZU-23-2 was the most common anti-aircraft weapon of the Taliban ground units. (US DoD/National Archives)



A group of three Jamiat-e Islami BMP-1s that had their turrets replaced with ZU-23-2 guns – and a 'regular' BMP-1 in the foreground – as seen outside Kabul after November 2001. Vehicles carry one of several Jamiat-e Islami roundels used by ground forces: this one was probably adopted only in 2001. (Davric/Wikipedia Commons)

air force apparently did not subject the Panjshir Valley to intense, continuous aerial attacks, even though it launched sporadic bombing raids against built-up areas, mostly killing civilians.

Massoud's forces – attempting to increase the firepower of their combat vehicles – equipped a few BMP-1s and BMP-2s with UB-32-57 rocket pods from combat aircraft and helicopters. These weapons were also fitted to at least one GAZ-66 truck, UAZ-469 jeep and BRDM-2 armoured car. Perhaps the most unique case of fitting an aircraft-mounted weapon to a vehicle was up-gunning a BMP-1 with an UPK-23 gun pod containing a GSh-23 autocannon, probably salvaged from a Mi-24. These makeshift weapons were used in combat through the 1990s civil war up to 2001.

Unlike the province of Badakhshan and some other areas where the population and some military commanders – although supporting

the ousted Rabbani government – were not particularly enthusiastic about resisting the Taliban, throughout the Panjshir the support for Massoud was unanimous. The determination of large segments of the Panjshir population to stand behind Massoud was based on the bloody history of their struggle against the Soviet forces through the 1980s when the invading army attempted to subdue the valley multiple times but repeatedly failed to succeed, eventually refraining from any further incursions to the area. The unity of the Panjshiris was so firm that there was never any attempt by any local commander to switch sides and let the Taliban into the valley – a kind of behaviour which in the context of the Afghan civil war was relatively unique: even the mostly coherent Jamiat-e Islami was not immune to defections of commanders that were bribed or otherwise attracted by the Taliban, for example, in Baghlan or even Badakhshan.

Back and Forth

In April 1999, according to the Pakistani press, an IEAAF fighter jet intercepted a transport aircraft coming from Iran and forced it to land at Herat airport.⁴ Not surprisingly, the cargo consisted of weapons and ammunition intended for the United Front. The fate of the aircraft is not known: if it indeed was an Iranian machine, most likely it was allowed back to Iran after the cargo had been unloaded as there are no reports of the Taliban capturing and detaining an Iranian plane. If it belonged to one of the United Front parties, it was probably confiscated and included in the IEAAF.

In the first months of the year, the most intense fighting took place in the rugged mountains of central Afghanistan where the Taliban and United Front factions battled in Darya Suf Valley in the province of Samangan and in the area around Bamiyan. IEAAF jets and helicopter gunships flew intensive actions but it is doubtful if these actually caused any significant casualties among oppositional guerrillas who lacked almost any armour or facilities of any kind. The Taliban also attempted to breach the lines of Massoud's units in Takhar and Kunduz multiple times but without success: Massoud's men, many of whom fought for the charismatic military leader in the 1980s proved to be the toughest opponents. In the province of Kunduz, Massoud

kept holding a narrow belt of land along the Panj river that forms the natural boundary between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The Taliban were eager to capture the towns in the area and close one of the opposition's last gates to the outside world, but all their offensives were repulsed.

Eventually, the Islamic movement was more successful in central Afghanistan. Wahdat militias that recaptured Bamiyan in April 1999 could not hold the city for more than a few weeks and on 15 May, overwhelmed by Taliban forces, they were pushed back to the mountains with disastrous consequences for the local civilian population. The Taliban victory over Wahdat was allegedly caused by disunity within the United Front whose different factions failed to engage the Taliban elsewhere, enabling them to concentrate forces strong enough to win Bamiyan back.

The most intensively contested area of all, however, was the one to the north of Kabul: here, the Taliban and Massoud's Panjshiri forces were stuck in a stalemate practically from late 1996. Bagram air base and important towns in the area had changed hands several times but no significant development leading to either side's decisive victory ever occurred. The Taliban, determined to rout Massoud from the Panjshir for good, did not abandon their intentions to capture the area of Bagram and proceed further into Massoud's stronghold. After gathering strong forces, including foreign jihadists of al-Qaeda – who until this time had not been sent directly to the frontlines, conducting logistical work and preparing defensive lines instead – and madrassa students from Pakistan, they launched a traditional summer offensive on 29 July.⁵ The fighting was the heaviest that Afghanistan had seen in the past 10 months: while the Taliban pushed north with thousands of combatants supported by tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery, helicopter gunships, and fighter jets, defenders put up stiff resistance and casualties were in the hundreds.⁶ Finally, on 2 August 1999, the Taliban captured Bagram, while Massoud's men retreated closer to the Panjshir Valley, losing also Charikar and Jabal us Saraj.⁷ In the conquered towns and villages the Taliban committed serious human rights violations as the area was inhabited mostly by Tajiks whom the Taliban accused of supporting Massoud. Taliban fighters burned

houses and crops and destroyed irrigation channels, effectively forcing thousands to flee to safer places. The Taliban's military success was short-lived, however. Only days later, in a spectacular counter-attack, Massoud was able to recapture the entire area and pushed the Taliban back to Kabul, establishing a frontline approximately 30 kilometres north of the city. Taliban jets flew intensive combat sorties from Kabul airport to help Taliban ground units in their defence but their bombing raids did not change the course of battle.⁸ With Bagram in his hands, Massoud began using his remaining An-32s that were permanently based in Tajikistan to resupply his men close to the Kabul frontline. Being under threat of shelling from the Taliban who still controlled



A derelict MiG-21bis as seen at Bagram AB. The more often the base changed hands, the more airframes ended up destroyed or heavily damaged due to sabotage and fighting. (US DoD)

surrounding mountains, Massoud's transports only made dangerous landings and take-offs at night.⁹

In September 1999, the IEAAF launched a several-week long bombing campaign against the northern city of Taloqan where an important opposition headquarters was located. At the same time, Taliban ground units increased the pressure on Massoud's defences. Unsurprisingly, those who suffered the most were civilians: hundreds were killed and hundreds more wounded in air strikes as the bombing was especially heavy. Massoud's forces reportedly managed to shoot down a single Su-22 with a Russian-supplied SA-14 MANPADS, while a Taliban jet destroyed one Mi-8 or Mi-17 in an extremely rare case of a successful hit against an opposition aircraft on the ground.¹⁰

In November, another round of infighting among United Front factions – although relatively limited in scope – took place in the provinces of Sar-e Pul, Takhar, and Badakhshan. In Sar-e Pul, Jamiat forces faced those of Junbish, while in Takhar, Jamiat clashed with those Hezb-e Islami commanders that were still loyal to the Rabbani government and had not defected to the Taliban. In Badakhshan province, that had virtually been spared of heavy fighting, Jamiat forces engaged in skirmishes with the militia of Ittihad-e Islami, a traditional ally from the early 1990s. Antonio Giustozzi put it as follows:

Explaining this ultimately suicidal behaviour is not easy. It might be speculated that the narrowing revenue base forced the different factions to compete even harder in order to grab as much as possible from their neighbours, despite the incumbent threat of the Taliban. It should also be considered that the horizons of many military leaders were quite narrow and their interests petty ones; in the absence of ideological commitment, none of them was willing to sacrifice his interests for a common cause. To local military rulers, the loss of their power base to a fellow military leader was as threatening as a takeover by the Taliban.¹¹

Despite mutual distrust between United Front parties and especially local commanders, Massoud's helicopters that operated from relatively safe bases in the Panjshir and Tajikistan regularly transported supplies to other parties' enclaves in central Afghanistan and also to the remnants of the Eastern Shura that still fought the Taliban in remote areas of the mountainous eastern provinces. From the top leaders' perspective, maintaining the United Front at least barely functioning, i.e. avoiding a full-scale war between United Front parties and supporting different commanders in their fight against the Taliban, was a matter of life and death.

On the diplomatic front, the last months of 1999 brought about yet another defeat of the Taliban government. In October, the UN adopted a resolution demanding that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden. As the Taliban refused to do so, the UN imposed economic sanctions on the Taliban a month later.

The Bout Affair

Victor Bout, a Russian entrepreneur who had become known as the world's preeminent arms trafficker and whose Il-76 was forced to land by a Taliban jet at Kandahar in 1995, reportedly went into business with the Islamic movement shortly after this embarrassing incident. Throughout his career in the transportation business, he was never motivated by ideology or sympathy for a certain warring faction: he served anyone who was willing to pay and cultivated business in places where others barely dared to go.

Bout had established initial contacts in Afghanistan with the internationally recognised government of Burhanuddin Rabbani and from 1994 (some sources even say from as early as 1992)¹², his

transport aircraft appeared regularly at the government-controlled airports, bringing in ammunition and small arms from Albania and other Eastern European countries. Although many mujahideen leaders remained staunchly anti-Russian even after the dissolution of the USSR and the fall of Najibullah, the Rabbani government developed a more pragmatic attitude and actually welcomed the businessman who could make things happen. Bout personally visited Afghanistan several times, enjoying hunting trips in the mountains that his hosts arranged for him in a bid to cultivate business relations. For Rabbani and Massoud, Bout's services were of crucial importance as during the initial years, their government had hardly any opportunity to buy military supplies from other sources. Bout said later in an interview: "I had a major pact with the Rabbani government. We sustained them."¹³

As the Taliban pressed into service the MiGs they captured in Kandahar, it was only a matter of time before something would go wrong. The crew of Bout's Il-76 that the Taliban forced to land at Kandahar airport reportedly knew that the movement's air force patrolled the area around the city and that it was important to keep a safe distance during flights from the emirate of Sharjah, where Bout had established his headquarters, to Kabul and back.¹⁴ Eventually, during the fateful flight, the crew either got too close to the Taliban AF operational area or the Taliban pilots intentionally pursued the Russian aircraft even if it had avoided the Kandahar area.

Victor Bout might have established first contacts with the Islamic movement shortly after it managed to intercept his Ilyushin, although precise circumstances are yet to be determined. What is sure, however, is that Bout's business relations with the Taliban rose to an unprecedented level in the first months after the fall of Kabul in 1996. Around that time, Farid Ahmed, a Taliban agent – officially the new Ariana Afghan Airline station manager – arrived in Sharjah, being handpicked for this role by the Taliban air force chief Mansour. Although the Taliban relationship with their Pakistani patrons was relatively good, the Taliban sought to secure alternative sources of weapons to reduce their dependence on Pakistan that reportedly allowed shipments of war material to the Taliban only after a particular operation was approved by Pakistani decision-makers.¹⁵ The Taliban disliked this and aimed at establishing their own supply lines. Bout was ready to help. From late 1996, his transport aircraft regularly flew from Sharjah to airports in Afghanistan, delivering small arms, ammunition, satellite telephones, and also refrigerators, food, and other commercial goods. This was only the beginning of much larger operations though. The Islamic movement's growing isolation on the international scene caused by its unwillingness to extradite Osama bin Laden, a poor human rights record, and multiple other factors gradually made Bout a crucial partner to the Taliban simply because he was willing to take risks and was actually able to deliver what his customer needed.

According to documents found in Kabul after the fall of the Taliban regime, starting in 1998 Bout's companies sold the Taliban transport aircraft that – although being owned by the Taliban air force and manned by military pilots – in some cases had the distinctive blue and white paintjob of Ariana Airlines and civilian registrations. The total number of Antonovs sold to the Taliban by Bout's Air Cess and his Emirati business partners, such as Flying Dolphin, reportedly reached seven. Four of them were disguised as Ariana machines and regularly flew to Sharjah. In one particular case, the Taliban bought an An-24 that was in such a poor state that – as the manager of the Aerovista company that previously owned the aircraft said – it could not be sold to anybody else.¹⁶

Since the capture of Kabul in 1996, the Taliban had used Ariana Airlines for military purposes and as time went by, the involvement

of Ariana's machines and staff in transporting military shipments, al-Qaeda terrorists, drugs, and other illicit cargo grew to such an extent that the airline practically merged with the Taliban air force, although the majority of Ariana staff were still civilians who were not particularly happy with the course of events. Bout arranged not only the repainting of the aircraft but also their maintenance and servicing. His ground crews in Sharjah routinely changed Ariana aircraft registrations to make their possible tracking more difficult.¹⁷

Ironically, as Bout strengthened his business ties with the Taliban, he continued to work for the deposed Rabbani government. In one interview he noted – and other sources confirm his words – that he flew military supplies for the United Front until they had lost their last suitable airfields, which probably means that he flew in shipments until the fall of Mazar-e Sharif in August 1998. A close Bout associate later commented: "He was flying for the Taliban while flying for Massoud and the Northern Alliance. Of course he was. He was friend of everyone. They tolerated this because they had no alternative. No one else would deliver the packages."¹⁸

Sharjah International Airport remained the Taliban aviation's primary gate to the outside world up to the early 2000s. As the United Arab Emirates was one of three countries that had given the Taliban government diplomatic recognition, Sharjah – one of the Emirates whose free trade zone was known for its lax oversight and close ties to Islamic radicals – became the main shopping centre for the Taliban. In 2000 the Ariana transport aircraft – some of them actually Taliban air force transports – sometimes landed in Sharjah as many as three times a day depending on the season.¹⁹ For the UN it was no secret that these flights were probably moving drugs, terrorists, and weapons. In reaction to these concerns, the UN decided to impose further sanctions on the Taliban regime in late 2000 (including an arms embargo), making international flights by Ariana impossible. From then, it was Bout's aircraft that ensured a steady flow of military cargo and Islamist radicals to Afghanistan, mainly flying to Kabul and Kandahar. Eventually, it was Bout's cooperation with the Taliban that caused US and international investigators to take a hard stance against him: in 2008, seven years after the fall of the Taliban regime, Viktor Bout was arrested in Thailand and extradited to the US where he was sentenced to 25 years of imprisonment.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Air Force

As the Taliban conquered much of Afghanistan, they also formed the most capable and best equipped of all remaining Afghan air forces of the late 1990s. Gaining control of additional airports and collecting their enemies' serviceable aircraft in their hands enabled the movement to create an air force that was absolutely unmatched by the shattered air arms of Jamiat and Junbish. The overall state of the service was anything but satisfactory though.

After the capture of Kabul and the north, the IEAAF had approximately 20 jets, 10 helicopters, and 10 transport aircraft at its disposal. The number of aircraft varies widely depending on the source and there is no possibility to verify the numbers, especially as the actual number of operational aircraft varied over time due to lack of spare parts, combat losses, mishaps, the occasional purchase of transports from abroad, the capture of additional aircraft at opposition airports, and the pressing into service the aircraft whose crews defected to the Taliban from their opponents. The result of all these events was that the number of fighter jets, transport aircraft, and helicopters constantly changed and all data one can see in literature are nothing more than very rough estimates. What is confirmed is the presence of at least four airworthy L-39 Albatros trainers at Kandahar by 2000.

Due to lack of spare parts and improper maintenance, many Taliban aircraft were in poor condition and unsafe to fly. Therefore, mechanics sometimes altered serials to keep reluctant fliers from refusing an aircraft they knew was particularly problematic.²⁰ The poor technical state of the aircraft might have been the reason for occasional accidents. For example, in October 1997, a Taliban MiG-21 crashed on landing at Kandahar airport. Its pilot, General Ghuljai, did not eject and died in the crash. As can be seen in Appendix III of this book, a number of IEAAF helicopters crashed as well when flying outside any combat zone which indicates that the cause of such losses were technical problems or pilot error.

It cannot be ruled out that the Taliban recruited a few pilots from Pakistan and Arab countries, however, the vast majority of Taliban airmen were Afghans trained in the 1970s and 1980s that had served in the AAF and later decided to continue their service within the Taliban. The pilots' salaries were incredibly low, reportedly an equivalent of 50 or just 30 US dollars per month.²¹ The life stories of many Taliban pilots were full of twists: for example, Qabil Khan, a jet pilot who formerly served under Najibullah was shot down by Taliban anti-aircraft artillery while flying one of Dostum's aircraft. After being kept in a Taliban prison for nearly six months, he was released in a prisoner exchange. Quite surprisingly, after the Taliban finally conquered Mazar-e Sharif in 1998, Qabil Khan voluntarily decided to fly for his former captors.²² Indeed, some Afghan pilots flew for no less than four different masters, starting their careers in the Afghan communist government air force, later flying either for Massoud, Dostum or other commander, then for the Taliban, and eventually, after 2001, for the US-backed Karzai government.

While the Taliban did not have problems with recruiting Afghan pilots, the movement reportedly lacked properly trained ground crews and had to partially rely on Pakistan Air Force and Pakistan International Airlines mechanics to maintain its aircraft, although it gradually managed to lure a number of ex-communist radar, communication and maintenance specialists to its side.

One of the most serious issues within the IEAAF was the distrust and disrespect of Taliban commanders towards the ex-communist air force personnel. Although after taking Kabul in 1996 the Taliban started creating formal state structures – including the MoD – and employed some ex-communist professionals in leading positions, their role was essentially to advise their Taliban bosses, who had all power in their hands, and who were directly in contact with Mullah Mohammad Omar, the movement's leader. Indeed, while the Taliban established their ministries in Kabul, it was Mohammad Omar and the Taliban's Kandahar Shura composed of mostly uneducated mullahs that were the actual decision-makers. Taliban commanders who had no experience with aviation often forced transport pilots to fly in dangerous weather conditions or insisted on aircraft being loaded with cargo or passengers above the aircrafts' limits, although this practice was commonplace in all other Afghan air forces as well. Taliban pilots had no other option than to obey their bosses' orders: when they refused to fly, they were beaten and even imprisoned. Flying in dangerous conditions sometimes resulted in disaster: for example, on 13 January 1998, an An-12 flying from Herat to Kandahar had to divert to the Pakistani city of Quetta because of bad weather but lacked fuel to reach the destination and crashed on Pakistani territory.²³ The crew of six and all 45 passengers were killed.

Some of the Taliban commanders were suspicious of the former communist pilots and did not treat them well; this attitude could even result in a brutal punishment. When an Antonov transport exploded on the ground, probably as a result of a technical failure, one pilot was hanged immediately without trial while another one was detained

and tortured for a month. The Taliban also forced some pilots to grow long beards and imposed fasting during Ramadan even for the pilots scheduled to fly.²⁴

As previously mentioned, the top commander of the Taliban aviation – both military and civilian – was Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, an Afghan religious student who returned back to his country from a Pakistani madrassa. After the Taliban had seized Kabul, Mansour was made director of Ariana Airlines. Making a step further in his career, Mansour was subsequently advanced to the Minister of Aviation and Tourism of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, taking charge of all airports in Taliban hands. Alongside this position, he also held a post within the MoD, heading the IEAAF and air defence forces.

Despite occasional harsh treatment, Taliban airmen were surprisingly loyal and defections to the United Front were extremely rare, especially compared to the number of opposition pilots who defected to the Taliban. The temptation to join the winning side that caused the defections of numerous commanders and rank-and-file fighters of Dostum, Massoud, Wahdat, and others also played its role in the well-known defections of Dostum's, Malik's, and even Massoud's pilots.

The IEAAF most probably did not establish any elaborate program aimed at training new pilots and as already stated, it apparently had enough skilled and combat-experienced manpower to fly its aircraft. By the late 1990s, many Afghan airmen of all warring factions had logged thousands of hours, some of them reportedly over 5,000-6,000. According to one source, on 10 December 1998 the Taliban and China signed an agreement for the training of Taliban pilots but this deal most probably only included civilian Ariana airmen.²⁵

IEAAF fighter jets mostly operated from Kandahar, while airports at Kabul, Shindand, Herat, Jalalabad, and Mazar-e Sharif were also used when needed. For example, Kabul airport was especially busy during offensives against Massoud in the area of Bagram and against Shi'a forces around Bamyan. However, there is no indication of functional cooperation between Taliban ground units and the movement's fighter jets: although MiGs and Sukhois participated in all major operations over the country, their pilots did not directly coordinate with ground units, hitting randomly chosen targets behind the frontlines and causing great collateral damage if conducting raids in build-up areas. The psychological implications of aerial attacks outweighed their military usefulness. Lack of proper processes for selecting suitable targets can, for example, be illustrated by missing the opportunity to inflict a blow to Massoud by destroying his Scuds, Frog-7s, BM-22s, and other heavy weapons stored for years at a single location in the Panjshir Valley. With the exception of one transport helicopter destroyed in Taloqan, the IEAAF probably never scored any hits against any of the United Front or foreign aircraft that were so often present not only in the Panjshir but also on numerous landing strips and airports in northern, north-eastern, and central provinces.

As the Taliban conquered much of Afghanistan and captured radars and anti-aircraft weapons present at various air bases, they began establishing their air defence capabilities as well. Initially, the standard anti-aircraft weapon of the Taliban were the ubiquitous ZU-23-2 cannons that were typically installed on Soviet-made ZIL-131 trucks and used mainly in anti-personnel roles but after the fall of Kabul, the Taliban captured some SA-2, SA-3, and SA-13 SAM systems and ZSU-23-4 SPAAGs as well. It seems that at least SA-3s, SA-13s, and ZSU-23-4s were kept operational but they probably never scored any hits as they were physically far from any actual combat zone. The only photographic evidence of Taliban SA-3s and SA-13s comes from Kabul and Kandahar that in the late 1990s and early 2000s did not see any aerial attacks simply because the Taliban's opponents were left

with next to no operational jets, while the precious helicopters and transport aircraft were used almost exclusively in non-combat roles. As early as in 1995, the Taliban captured some Stinger and probably also SA-7 MANPADS but their actual state and combat usage remains unknown: most probably by the late 1990s they were of no use as their battery life is quite limited.²⁶

There are relatively a lot of reports of Pakistani jets flying bombing missions against various United Front targets. However, there is no hard evidence – photographic or of similar nature – that PAF aircraft directly supported the Taliban in combat. Accusations of this kind typically came from anti-Taliban officials who could be viewed as a biased source. Officials within the United Front, and also Iranian and Russian representatives, also repeatedly reported Pakistani army soldiers serving alongside Taliban units on the frontlines but failed to present any evidence whatsoever. While the presence of Pakistani madrassa students in the Taliban ranks is no secret – the United Front presented their documents and allowed journalists to interview captured fighters – there has been a total lack of similar evidence that Pakistani military personnel actively fought against the United Front, although this possibility cannot be absolutely ruled out. It is highly likely, however, that ISI and the Pakistani army provided specialists assisting the Taliban military with communications, logistics, training, planning, and other activities, helping to shape the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan armed forces and boosting their combat capabilities. Pakistan also supported the Taliban with money, fuel, ammunition, and other war material, and enabled thousands of Pakistani madrassa students and members of extremist organisations to regularly cross into Afghanistan and back.

In their efforts to keep the Emirate's air force functioning, the Taliban did not rely solely on Pakistan though: in 1998, the Taliban's aviation chief Mansour personally went to Europe where he actually managed to buy aircraft spare parts and airport equipment. According to Mullah Nek Mohammad, who served in the German city of Frankfurt as the then-Taliban government's unofficial envoy to Europe, Mansour bought what he needed from Czech and German companies. "At that time, the Taliban regime was not under UN sanctions, and Mansour bought about four containers full of stuff and a number of oil tanks for the airports" Mohammad recalled.²⁷

According to various sources, after 1996 the Taliban transferred a few transport helicopters to al-Qaeda that used them to move militiamen of the infamous 055 Brigade and the organisation's leaders over the country. For example, a suspected terrorist who was later on trial in Belgium witnessed that Osama bin Laden travelled between Afghan cities in his personal helicopter.²⁸ Thus, it can be said that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Afghanistan-based branch of al-Qaeda actually established a small air arm of its own.

Arming the United Front

As the threat of the Taliban grew stronger following the fall of Kabul, the Malik rebellion and further setbacks to anti-Taliban opposition, Russia, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan intensified their involvement in the Afghan civil conflict, although this support never reached the scope and intensity with which Saudi, some Gulf circles, and Pakistan supported the Taliban.

Russia and Tajikistan channelled their aid primarily to the ousted Rabbani government, i.e. to Massoud's forces, Uzbekistan supported Dostum, and Iran continued its backing of Hezb-e Wahdat, although eventually each of the countries provided some form of assistance to each of the anti-Taliban parties. For Massoud's forces, Russian support was essential as the only reasonable land route from Massoud's territories to the outside world led through Tajikistan where the

Russian 201st Division was still stationed, guarding the border. Russia not only provided direct assistance to the Rabbani government and allowed deliveries of material over the border from Tajikistan but it also coordinated ground transfer of aid from Iran through ex-Soviet Central Asian republics to Afghanistan.

The key to acquiring arms from abroad was the ability of the Rabbani government to earn money. While in 1993–1994 Saudi Arabia reportedly provided the Rabbani government with \$150 million US and Rabbani also received arms worth \$5–10 million US from an unidentified NATO country, in the late 1990s the Saudis shifted their aid to the Taliban, while the Rabbani government was left with relatively little money. For example, it was able to get a modest sum of \$7–10 million US a year by selling lapis lazuli and emeralds that were mined in the Panjshir Valley and other sites under government control.²⁹ Other revenue might have come from producing and transporting drugs, although it is not known if this was a private business of specific commanders or if it was secretly organised by the Rabbani government itself. General Dawran, Massoud's air force chief, reportedly acknowledged that in the late 1990s his helicopters regularly transported drugs over the border to Tajikistan.³⁰ Furthermore, as will be explained below, additional money was coming to the Rabbani government from India.

No matter the sources of income, the government had enough cash to enable it to regularly buy ammunition and military hardware from Russia. Indeed, according to available reports it seems that Russian deliveries were of a commercial nature and that Russia did not provide any military aid for free, although it supported Rabbani on the diplomatic front. From the late 1990s to 2001, for example, Russia delivered around eight Mi-17s, at least two Mi-24s, and an unknown number of SA-14 MANPADS.³¹ In 2001, it boosted the combat capabilities of Massoud's forces with dozens of T-55 tanks and BMP-1 IFVs that eventually performed operations in the provinces of Takhar and Kunduz in cooperation with the US and British air forces during Operation Enduring Freedom. Polish orientalist Piotr Balcerowicz, who visited Panjshir in summer 2001, recalls: "I could also witness their five Mi-35s, which they said they had just acquired. They were all for a while in Panjshir, and I could watch them in action. Several kilometres north of Panjshir, they demonstrated their military capabilities: swiftly flying in all directions, suddenly changing the course of flight, and shooting in all directions."³²

Apart from Russia, the Rabbani government was also backed by India. Mentions of Indian technicians repairing government MiGs at Bagram AB had circulated in the Pakistani media already before the Taliban conquered Kabul in 1996, although information like this is difficult to independently verify. Similarly, reports in the Pakistani media about India delivering MiG-21s to the Rabbani government probably were nothing more than unsubstantiated rumours, especially as these accusations exclusively came from anti-Rabbani parties. It is certain, however, that Indian aid started pouring in to the Rabbani government shortly after the Taliban victory in Kabul in 1996. Although India probably never delivered any weapons directly, from late 1996 it regularly provided money that the Rabbani government used to buy weapons from Russia. For example, the huge shipments of tanks and IFVs that reached the ousted government's territories in 2001 were reportedly paid for with Indian money. India also provided physicians that treated Massoud's wounded fighters at a field hospital that India had established at the former Soviet air force Farkhor AB in Tajikistan. As the base is situated very close to the Afghan border, it was also used for servicing and refuelling Massoud's helicopters.³³

Tajikistan itself, still recovering from the devastating civil war and being short of cash, could not provide the Rabbani government with

arms and weapons but allowed Massoud's aircraft to operate from the above-mentioned Farkhor AB, Kulob airport, and also from the international airport in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe. The ousted Afghan government contracted Tajik Airlines to provide servicing of Mi-17 helicopters that regularly flew between Afghanistan and the Tajik capital. Tajikistan also sold Massoud aircraft fuel.³⁴

Unsurprisingly, Uzbek General Dostum received support from Uzbekistan, although sources differ significantly regarding extent of this assistance. While some state that between 1994 and 1997 Dostum received as much as \$180 million US worth of weapons, fuel, and other material, others cite much lower values of aid and label Uzbekistan as something of an unreliable partner that supported Dostum only half-heartedly. Photographic evidence exists of several Mi-8 helicopters that had previously served with the Uzbek air force and Uzbek civilian operators and that were later transferred to Dostum, although precise dates of their delivery and other circumstances regarding their service remain unknown. In later stages of the conflict, when the threat of the Taliban became imminent, Uzbekistan apparently became more active in supporting Dostum and allowed the general's surviving aircraft to operate from Termez airport. Western journalists present in Uzbekistan also reported the presence of aircraft with no markings that were operating from Termez and delivering aid to anti-Taliban factions.³⁵ Whether these were Uzbek or belonged to any of the anti-Taliban opposition air forces remains unknown though.

Hezb-e Wahdat's primary benefactor was the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hazara parties relied on Iranian support from the 1980s and after uniting in Wahdat, the Afghan Shi'a received Iranian money, weapons, and ammunition for the whole of the 1990s civil war, although the lack of a direct land connection of Shi'a inhabited central Afghanistan with Iran significantly complicated the deliveries that could be carried out solely by air. After Mazar-e Sharif, Bamiyan, and Yakawlang fell into Taliban hands in 1998, Iranian weapons and ammunition had either to be transported by the railway network from Iran through Turkmenistan and other Central Asian states to Tajikistan and – by trucks – further to Afghanistan, or flown in by Iranian C-130 or anti-Taliban opposition transport aircraft flying from the Iranian city of Mashad to Tajikistan or to airports controlled by Massoud in northeastern Afghanistan. In the short periods of time when Wahdat managed to expel the Taliban from Bamiyan or Yakawlang, Iranian and Afghan aircraft flew directly to airstrips outside these towns, although aid delivered in this fashion never made any difference in the field and the Taliban pushed Wahdat back to the mountains repeatedly in 1999, 2000, and 2001.

Iran also supported the Rabbani government, although the relationship with Rabbani and Massoud remained problematic, primarily as a result of the Afshar operation in Kabul in 1993 and total defeat of Wahdat in the capital in 1995. However, as the Sunni Taliban grew stronger, Iran started delivering aid to Massoud and to some extent Dostum as well. After Wahdat's and Dostum's debacle in the summer 1998, Massoud became the biggest recipient of Iranian aid, although even then, Iran insisted that a portion of Iranian military supplies that got over the Tajik border to Massoud's territories went to Wahdat guerrillas operating in central Afghanistan.

America's role in the 1990s conflict in Afghanistan was insignificant. Massoud was in loose contact with CIA agents who travelled to the Panjshir multiple times, but nothing tangible materialised from this relationship until after the 9/11 terrorist attack on New York and Washington. Massoud got virtually no aid from the US even after the strikes against the al-Qaeda training camps in August 1998 after which the position of the Taliban definitely shifted from a force that could have been accepted to being America's enemy. Perhaps the only

support that the CIA offered to Massoud was sending a few American mechanics skilled in maintaining Mi-17 helicopters to Dushanbe to assist with repairing the machines, although it is not clear to what extent and for how long they were actually helping to keep the helicopters flyable. It seems the only reason for their presence were fears at the CIA headquarters that the agents travelling in Massoud's poorly maintained helicopters from Tajikistan to the Panjshir could lose their lives in an accident. Eventually, in 2001 the CIA secretly acquired its own Mi-17 to avoid traveling in Massoud's worn-out machines.³⁶

Battle of Taloqan

As Dostum and Wahdat were practically out of the game, the only force strong enough to prevent the Taliban from taking control over the whole country remained Massoud's formations that held two important frontlines: one north of Kabul and the other in the province of Takhar. The anticipated summer offensive against Massoud began on 1 July 2000. The Taliban and their patrons invested most of their energies in the battlefields north of Kabul where two large-scale attacks were attempted. The well-entrenched Panjshiri forces defeated both of them, which probably contributed to the Taliban's shifting attention to the north. Helped by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Arab, and Chechen jihadists, Pakistani madrassa students and probably also by elements of the Pakistani military and ISI, the Taliban gradually captured towns along the Panj River and soon began a major offensive against the opposition headquarters of Taloqan. General Musharraf, the Pakistani head of state, openly declared support for the Taliban and their operation.

For six consecutive weeks the Taliban launched unsuccessful attacks against the strategically important city, taking heavy losses. Finally, on 5 September 2000, Massoud's forces could not bear the brunt of the Taliban onslaught and withdrew east of Taloqan. The IEAAF was heavily involved in the fighting and also suffering heavy losses: eight MiG-21s and Su-22s were reportedly shot down by shoulder-mounted SA-14 SAMs over Taloqan.³⁷ The loss of General Allahdad, Commander of the Mazar-e Sharif AB and one of the IEAAF's most distinguished pilots – whose MiG-21 was shot down on 6 August 2000 – proved to be an especially heavy blow for the IEAAF. Massoud's aircraft losses in this period were minor: according to available reports, the Taliban captured the last operational Jamiat An-12 when they overran Taloqan airport.

The Islamic movement's victory in the north was a very significant one, potentially opening a way to Badakhshan province – the last one fully controlled by the anti-Taliban alliance – where the UN-recognised Afghan government had transferred its headquarters. Massoud, accepting the loss of Taloqan, was not about to retreat to Badakhshan though. His men established a new frontline to the east and north of the lost city, determined to hold as much land as possible, while Iran, Russia and the two central Asian countries backing the anti-Taliban alliance agreed to further intensify its support for Massoud.

From a logistical point of view, loss of Taloqan severely complicated transfer of supplies from Tajikistan deeper into the United Front-controlled land. Although the Taliban was not able to overrun the Khwaja Ghar airstrip that is situated a few kilometres north of Taloqan, it had to be closed for air traffic as it was too close to the frontline.³⁸ Up until that time, various Jamiat-e Islami transport aircraft, including the last operational An-12, landed regularly at the airstrip, bringing in weapons, ammunition, and other supplies. The site had also been used by Iranian C-130s. Thus, after the loss of Taloqan, the anti-Taliban forces' last airstrip suitable for landings of transport aircraft

was the one outside Fayzabad, the capital of Badakhshan province, but the area around the airport was under the control of autonomous commanders who cooperated with the Rabbani government only as long as it sent them money.³⁹ The bridge across the Panj River near the town of Dasht-e Qala that had reportedly been constructed with Iranian assistance in 1999 was too close to the frontline and could not be used, while the main land route from the province of Takhar to the Panjshir was now blocked by the victorious Taliban. This precarious situation further highlighted the role of Massoud's small fleet of Mi-17 helicopters that were absolutely essential in providing supplies for not only the Panjshir Valley but also more remote areas where United Front combatants were active.

In September 2000, the Taliban tried to infiltrate through the high mountains near the Pakistani border to the province of Badakhshan from the south-east. This attack, that might have been a reaction to the stalemate that had developed on the frontlines around Taloqan, was launched in an area that had previously been relatively calm and which the Taliban might have considered much less defended than Massoud's hardly penetrable positions in Takhar. However, the offensive was repulsed with the help of a pair of Mi-24 helicopters.

Last Months of the Taliban's Emirate

Since the fall of Taloqan in September 2000, the military situation in Afghanistan was relatively stable, although the province of Takhar, where Massoud's forces resisted the Taliban east and north of Taloqan, was a theatre of occasional fighting. Controlling the mountains outside the city and using the Kokcha river as a natural obstacle behind which they could organise their forces, Massoud managed to push back every Taliban attack.

In late summer 2000, the IEAAF had a unique opportunity to shoot down a CIA-operated Predator drone flying in the area of Kandahar. As the US intensified their efforts to hunt down or outright kill Osama bin Laden, they clandestinely began operating Predators from an airfield in southern Uzbekistan. The small and slow drones flew over suspect compounds undisturbed until one September day when someone at Kandahar airport noticed a drone flying nearby. A MiG-21 took off immediately but failed to shoot the drone down. According to the drone operators the MiG passed the drone three times only to return to the base. Apparently, the Taliban pilot's approaches were too fast.⁴⁰

The early months of 2001 brought about an unexpected development on the frontlines of central Afghanistan. General Dostum, living in a self-imposed exile in Turkey from the time of his defeat in 1998 was encouraged by Massoud to return to Afghanistan to lead Uzbek guerrillas operating in pockets of territory south of Mazar-e Sharif while Ismail Khan, who had unsuccessfully attempted to re-establish himself in Afghanistan in 2000 finally managed to do so and began organising Jamiat commanders in the mountains east of Herat. The third exiled United Front commander who returned to personally lead his group was Karim Khalili of Hezb-e Wahdat. Khalili had been taken by one of Massoud's helicopters to Bamyan province already in December 2000 and his group had conducted regular raids on Taliban positions ever since, even briefly recapturing the town of Bamyan in February 2001.⁴¹ The motive that prompted Massoud to organise this 'reunion' of commanders emanated from the danger of a Taliban offensive that many expected would begin soon after the melting of the winter snows. Although Massoud had so far been able to defend his positions in Takhar, everyone knew that the next round of fighting would be heavy. As in the previous years, the Taliban ranks were bolstered by Pakistani madrassa students, al-Qaeda jihadists, and fighters of the IMU, while the Taliban's military operations



A pair of Taliban Mi-25/35s and an Mi-8/17 overflying a military parade in Kabul in August 2001. (Mark Lepko Collection)

were advised by Pakistan Army officers. Massoud apparently hoped that an increased military activity of anti-Taliban groups in central Afghanistan would engage some Taliban forces that could have otherwise been used in the impending Takhar offensive, making the Taliban move less threatening.

Indeed, when the Taliban eventually launched their campaign that focused primarily on the Farkhar gorge east of Taloqan – which is a gate to Badakhshan – and on towns along the Panj River, Massoud's forces successfully held the defensive lines they had prepared during the winter months. According to the available sources, the Taliban actually diverted some of their units to other areas to fight Khalili, Dostum, and Khan, thus lessening the pressure against Massoud. Taliban fighter jets regularly bombed the opposition's enclaves in central Afghanistan and even dropped some bombs very close to Dostum but failed to kill him.

Meanwhile, Uzbekistan involved its air force in direct support of the anti-Taliban opposition. Aircraft of the Uzbekistan Air Force flew a number of missions against the Islamic movement and on 6 June 2001, for example, an Su-24 of the Uzbekistan Air and Air Defence Forces (UAADF) was shot down while attacking Taliban targets near Hairatan. The crew of the aircraft was killed.⁴²

In August 2001, the Taliban held a huge military parade in Kabul, showing not only Frog-7 rockets and numerous tanks and AFVs, but also anti-aircraft weapons including SA-2, SA-3, and SA-13 systems, while the IEAAF presented its jets and helicopters. The parade ground was decorated with banners with slogans in English, apparently to deliver a message intended for the outside world. One of them read, 'Afghanistan is the graveyard of invaders and colonialists'. Ironically, just weeks later, Afghanistan became the target of a major military operation led by the world's only superpower.

On 9 September, the anti-Taliban opposition suffered a loss that no-one expected: two al-Qaeda terrorists disguised as Belgian journalists killed Ahmad Shah Massoud with a bomb hidden in a camera. The badly injured Massoud reportedly died on board a helicopter during evacuation to the Indian-operated Farkhor field hospital in Tajikistan. The assassination's planners in al-Qaeda probably hoped that without the most

revered commander who had always served as a unifying figure, Jamiat-e Islami in north-eastern Afghanistan would disintegrate into separate groups that would be much less capable of facing the Taliban. It is not hard to imagine that the planners intentionally coordinated the commander's assassination with the terrorist attacks against the US. Al-Qaeda had probably expected that after the attacks, the US would turn their attention towards Afghanistan and make an alliance with the anti-Taliban forces. To Jamiat-e Islami commanders and rank-and-file fighters alike, Massoud's death came as a shock and it took several days until Jamiat representatives officially admitted that Massoud had been assassinated. The only immediate military response to the commander's death was a rare nocturnal attack on Kabul airport performed by either a Mi-17 or Mi-24 helicopter that, however, caused no damage.

On 11 September, while America was experiencing the horror caused by the al-Qaeda attacks in New York and Washington, the Taliban launched a large offensive against Jamiat forces north of Kabul.⁴³ The frontline remained stable though and in the weeks before the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban did not achieve any significant victory anywhere throughout the country. Apparently, the loss of Massoud did not cause an immediate failure in the opposition forces.

While there was intensive activity on the diplomatic front over a possible extradition of Usama bin Laden, the civil war in Afghanistan continued and the IEAAF actively participated in the fighting. For example, on 5 October, a Taliban jet dropped two cluster bombs near the town of Charikar north of Kabul.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the CIA established new, or refreshed old, contacts with various anti-Taliban commanders both in the north-east and in remote areas of central Afghanistan and began sending small groups of operatives into the country, followed by men from the USSOCOM. The US military planned that these groups would serve as coordinators between the United Front and the US forces and as forward air controllers in the intended aerial attacks on Afghanistan. Thousands of dollars that the special forces carried with them in bags and boxes were given to United Front commanders to facilitate the US mission.

Operation Enduring Freedom

The US-led bombing of Taliban and al-Qaeda targets – which marked the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom – started on 7 October 2001. The first hours of the attacks was the moment when the IEAAF ceased to exist: the US and British forces not only knocked-out the majority of airworthy Taliban aircraft but also destroyed countless old, unairworthy MiG-17s, MiG-15UTIs, Antonovs and other aircraft that had been abandoned in 1992 or even earlier. Many Ariana passenger



While the Taliban presented their SA-2 SAMs at several military parades, their actual operational status and possible combat deployment remains a mystery. (Mark Lepko Collection)

and cargo aircraft were targeted as well to prevent the Taliban or al-Qaeda from using them as flying bombs in possible suicide missions against the Allied forces.

Although a few Taliban fighter jets actually survived the first waves of attacks, none of the pilots attempted to take off and risk their lives in a losing battle: on the contrary, most were ordered to go home.⁴⁵ However, instead of 'going home' or 'disappearing in the countryside', as ordered by their superiors, a large group of ex-communist Taliban pilots, mechanics and other specialists defected to Pakistan, leaving behind only younger and more fanatical comrades. According to one of the pilots who fled to the Pakistani city of Quetta, they decided to leave simply because they knew they had no chance against the American technology: "The Taliban have asked me and the others to return but we will not. We don't want to die. You cannot fight against the Americans' technology, it is not possible. Educated military men know that."⁴⁶

Apart from aircraft, the US and British airstrikes also destroyed radars and anti-aircraft missile sites in order to eliminate the potential threat of Taliban air defence activity. Among the primary targets in this initial phase of the operation were airports in Kandahar, Herat, Shindand, Mazar-e Sharif, Jalalabad and Kabul and also al-Qaeda training camps and other high-value sites. The Taliban's only reaction was random shooting with anti-aircraft guns – mainly ZU-23-2 – and launching a few SAMs or MANPADS, all of which missed.⁴⁷

Immediately after the beginning of the US attacks, two – some sources say as many as five – Taliban Mi-17s landed in Kurram district of the Pakistani North-West Frontier Province to avoid destruction. Although Pakistani authorities seized the helicopters, they reportedly were returned to the Taliban a day later and forced to fly back to Afghanistan.⁴⁸ The eventual fate of these machines remains unknown though several Taliban aircraft indeed escaped the US attacks and later found their way into the resurrected Afghan air force. For example, a few days before the outbreak of the war, Brigadier General Barat – who had previously worked for Massoud – flew a Mi-17 from Kabul to a mountain hideout where the machine had been kept until the end of the fighting. The helicopter, number 514, was then flown back to the capital and continued to serve in the newly established ANAAC.⁴⁹ Similarly, in western Afghanistan, ground crews managed to hide two operational MiG-21s so well that they stayed unnoticed by the Allied air forces.

After clearing Afghan skies of potential Taliban threats, Allied forces shifted their focus to bombing of concentrations of Taliban militiamen, armour and defensive positions in order to enable the anti-Taliban forces to begin their offensives. During the first few weeks of bombardment, however, the Taliban showed an immense capability to sustain losses and it took almost an entire month of relentless air raids until the movement's frontlines suddenly started collapsing. When that finally happened, it resulted in a surprisingly fast United Front



It is known that the Taliban deployed their SA-13s in the Kabul and in the Kandahar area. While those operated in Kabul received a new camouflage pattern consisting of sand, brown, green, and black, as visible here, those protecting Kandahar airport were left in their overall green colour, applied before delivery to Afghanistan. (Mark Lepko Collection)

victory: during just a few days of early November 2001, the 'old guard' of anti-Taliban leaders conquered virtually all of the major cities outside the southern Pashtun belt. Abdul Rashid Dostum and his arch rival Atta Mohammad Nur recaptured Mazar-e Sharif, Ismail Khan – helped by not only American special forces but also the Iranian Quds force that coordinated with Americans – evicted the Taliban from Herat, Jamiat General Baba Jan recaptured the area around Bagram, his Jamiat comrade-in-arms General Mohammad Daoud Daoud seized Taloqan, Karim Khalili of Hezb-e Wahdat took control of Bamyan and – rather unexpectedly – Jamiat forces jubilantly entered Kabul on 13 November after the Taliban had fled to the south without offering any resistance.

Thus, all of a sudden, Taliban units that were located outside the southern Pashtun territories simply disintegrated, unable to fight conventional frontline battles and being too demoralised to organise any guerrilla warfare. Many Pashtun commanders serving in the north fled with their men to the mountains, trying to reach southern provinces, while many others – especially those that had joined the



According to the Pentagon, the Taliban air defence did actually fire several SAMs against Allied aircraft during the first hours of Operation Enduring Freedom. This SA-3 site was knocked out during air strikes on Kandahar airport. The photograph was taken in January 2002. (US National Archives)



An interesting photograph showing the aftermath of Allied air strikes on Kandahar airport. Notable is wreckage of three An-12s, an L-39 Albatros, a Mi-8/17 and a Mi-24/35. (US National Archives)

Taliban in the late 1990s after accepting bribes – defected back to the anti-Taliban opposition whose leaders, acting in a typical Afghan way, welcomed most of them back without many problems. The only northern city that remained in the Taliban hands was Kunduz where a huge number of IMU, Pakistani and al-Qaeda fighters took refuge and resisted all attempts of the United Front forces to seize it. Eventually, only after days of Allied bombing raids, and against the will of non-Afghan fighters present in the city that intended to fight to the last man, the Taliban commander agreed to surrender. Some credible reports suggest that in the weeks before the fall of Kunduz, Pakistan Air Force C-130s airlifted as many as 5,000 Pakistani and other nationals from the besieged Afghan city to PAF bases in Gilgit and Chitral in Pakistan. In this operation, PAF saved not only members of ISI and Pakistan armed forces but also Taliban and al-Qaeda commanders, Pakistani nationals fighting for the Taliban and al-Qaeda combatants coming from Muslim countries, although both Pakistan and the US denied that the 'Airlift of Evil', as the operation was being called in some Western media, ever happened.⁵⁰

In the south, the Taliban resistance was tougher and local anti-Taliban opposition much weaker than the United Front commanders in the north. It took another month of fighting and air raids before the Taliban surrendered their capital of Kandahar to forces of Hamid Karzai, Gul Agha Sherzai and Mulla Naqibullah – the same man who had surrendered his fighters and weapons to the Taliban in 1994. The tactics of offering money to opposing commanders which the Taliban had used during their conquest of the Afghan south in 1995 and 1996 eventually proved to be the movement's crucial weakness: many less-motivated Taliban commanders did not have any problem switching sides to the US after being properly paid, bringing entire units with them and turning them against the remnants of the Taliban forces that were still offering resistance.

While thousands of Taliban Pashtun fighters surrendered, some of them even joining the new masters' militias, a much smaller number of Taliban combatants – including al-Qaeda fighters – fled to the high mountains on the Pakistani border to wage guerrilla warfare that in the next few years would engulf large areas of the country. However, from the strictly military point-of-view, the initial phase of OEF was an immense success: in a matter of a few months, the Taliban regime

was defeated with only minimal involvement of the Allied ground forces and minimal Allied casualties. Al-Qaeda lost its safe heaven and its leaders together with scattered groups of combatants mostly fled over the border to Pakistan. A new Afghan government was created in December 2001 with Hamid Karzai as head of state and the process of creating new national institutions – including the army and air force – was started.

Seeds of a New Afghan Air Force

First steps in re-establishing the Afghan air force were taken shortly after the fall of the Taliban government. The new service that was created as a branch within the Afghan

National Army – and thus called the Afghan National Army Air Corps – was initially equipped with various party's aircraft that survived the war. Almost all airworthy Jamiat, Junbish, and Taliban air assets were one by one concentrated at Kabul airport and that became the main hub of the service and the markings of the former owners were replaced with the traditional Afghan air force triangle roundel that was re-introduced immediately after the formation of the ANAAC in early 2002.

The biggest portion of ANAAC air assets came from Jamiat-e Islami, i.e. the Rabbani government air force. All airworthy An-26s, An-32s, Mi-8/17s and Mi-24/25s returned to active service, forming the core of the ANAAC until new aircraft and helicopters – financed by the US – arrived in the country.

Additionally, at Sheberghan air base in the north, three former Junbish air force L-39Cs were found intact. It is not known if the machines had been taken over and used by the IEAAF when the Taliban evicted Dostum from Sheberghan in 1998, but they somehow managed to survive the war and after the fall of the Taliban they were transferred to Kabul. Two of them – serials 0021 and 0023 – then went



This ex-Taliban MiG-21bis was returned to service once Ismail Khan had defeated the Islamist movement in western Afghanistan, with extensive US assistance, in October 2001. Several years later, the machine ended its career dumped at the huge scrapyard at Shindand AB. (US Army Photo)



A Boeing-Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter of the US Marine Corps as seen at Kandahar airport during Operation Enduring Freedom. Visible behind it are two radars, both probably used by Taliban air defences. (US National Archives)



MiG-21bis serial number 978 as seen while being prepared to be transported out of Bagram AB under a Boeing CH-47 Chinook helicopter of the US Army. (US National Archives)



Remains of an ex-Taliban Mi-8T, serial number 668, photographed at Kandahar airport. (US National Archives)

to Russia for overhaul while the third one – serialled 005 – served as a source of spare parts.

In Herat, the two ex-IEAAF jets that miraculously survived the Allied attacks – a MiG-21bis serial 923 and a MiG-21UM serial 561 – re-entered service but never found their way to the capital, probably because in Herat, Ismail Khan again concentrated power in his hands and the local military forces paid allegiance primarily to him, even if officially they were under command of the MoD. Khan's MiGs were later flown to Shindand AB and after an armed conflict between the Afghan government and Khan, they remained grounded, ending their careers at a huge Shindand junkyard.

The last Afghan aircraft that returned to Kabul was a MiG-21bis serial 352 that suddenly appeared over the capital as late as in March 2002 without anyone informing the air traffic controllers in advance. After landing, astonished ISAF troops learned that the jet that had previously served within the Junbish air force came from Kulob airport in Tajikistan where it had escaped in the late 1990s to avoid capture by the Taliban. Unfortunately, the MiG crashed only a month after it returned to Afghanistan while performing a training flight. Allegedly, the pilot ejected but the parachute did not deploy and the pilot died in the crash.

Contrary to the Afghan air force that after the defeat of the Taliban regime set off to a new era, Afghan air defence capabilities ceased to exist altogether: all radars and SAM systems that survived the 1990s turmoil and that the Taliban managed to keep operational were either destroyed at the very beginning of OEF or left abandoned. Not surprisingly, as the probability of aerial threat remains low, restoration of the nation's air defence has been given the lowest priority.

Epilogue

As documented throughout this book, Afghan warring parties, thanks to the high number of trained pilots and ground crews and firm support network established during the height of the war in the 1980s could operate aircraft with little or no external support even after the Soviet pull-out and the fall of the communist regime. For almost 10 years, from April 1992 to the end of 2001, those ex-communist regime pilots and other specialists who were still willing to serve under the command of different mujahideen parties, warlords and movements were doing their best to keep the aircraft and air defences

ready for action in the most difficult of conditions. As can be seen below in Appendix III of this book, the level of attrition in the 1990s was relatively high and many crews lost their lives in shoot-downs and accidents, flying for masters who were continually destroying their country, unable to contain their personal ambitions. Eventually, after the US-led invasion in 2001, the Afghan Air Force, fragmented among the Taliban, Jamiat, and Junbish, represented only a shadow of its former self: from several hundreds of operational aircraft that were in active service in the late 1980s and early 1990s, only a few remain flying over the wild, mountainous country.

APPENDICES

Appendix I: Air Forces' Order of Battle after April 1992

This chart only contains those types that were in active service with a given faction; it does not list types that were captured but not pressed into service or captured in derelict condition.

Faction	Aircraft type
Jamiat-e Islami – Ahmad Shah Massoud	MiG-21, Su-17, Su-22, Mi-8, Mi-17, Mi-24, An-12, An-26, An-32, L-39 (unconfirmed)
Jamiat-e Islami – Ismail Khan	MiG-21, Su-17, Su-22, Mi-8, Mi-17, Mi-24, An-32
Jamiat-e Islami – Mulla Naqibullah	MiG-21, Mi-8, Mi-17 (unconfirmed), transport aircraft (highly likely but unconfirmed)
Junbish-e Milli – Abdul Rashid Dostum	MiG-21, Su-17, Su-22, Mi-8, Mi-17, Mi-24, An-12, An-24, An-26, An-32, L-39
Junbish-e Milli – Abdul Malik Pahlawan	MiG-21, Su-17, Su-22, Mi-8 or Mi-17 or both, transport aircraft (highly likely but unconfirmed), L-39
Hezb-e Islami	Su-17, Su-22, Mi-17, Mi-24, transport aircraft (highly likely but unconfirmed)
Hezb-e Wahdat	Mi-8, Fairchild-Hiller FH-227E, An-26, An-32 (unconfirmed)
Taliban	MiG-21, Su-17, Su-22, Mi-8, Mi-17, Mi-24, An-12, An-24, An-26, An-32, L-39
General Naderi	Mi-8

Appendix II: Defections 1989-2001

Unconfirmed defections are in italics.

Date	Type and number (if known)	Pilot	Defected from	Defected to
3.7.1989	Mil Mi-35	Unknown	Najibullah Government	Pakistan
6.7.1989	Sukhoi Su-22M4 (804)	Jan Pahrand	Najibullah Government	Pakistan (Peshawar)
29.9.1989	MiG-21bis (957)	Jalal Uddin Wardak	Najibullah Government	Pakistan (Peshawar)
February 1989	Mil Mi-35	Abdul Nai	Najibullah Government	Jamiat – Massoud (Panjshir)
February 1989	Mil Mi-35	Muh Amin	Najibullah Government	Jamiat – Massoud (Panjshir)
7.3.1990	Mil Mi-17	Gulam Rasul	Najibullah Government	Pakistan (Jamrud)
7.3.1990	Antonov An-12 (380)	Gulab Din	Najibullah Government	Pakistan (Peshawar)
23.1.1994	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Dostum	Jamiat – Massoud (Bagram)
23.1.1994	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Dostum	Jamiat – Massoud (Bagram)
23.1.1994	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Dostum	Jamiat – Massoud (Bagram)
23.1.1994	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Dostum	Jamiat – Massoud (Bagram)

23.1.1994	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Dostum	Jamiat – Khan (Shindand)
23.1.1994	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Dostum	Jamiat – Khan (Shindand)
23.1.1994	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Dostum	Jamiat – Khan (Shindand)
5.2.1994	Mil Mi-17	Mohammad Anwar	Junbish – Dostum	Jamiat – unknown commander (Qaysar)
15.7.1996	MiG-21bis	Abdul Jalil	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud (Bagram)
24.9.1996	Antonov (type unknown)	Unknown	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud (Bagram)
24.5.1997	Sukhoi Su-17M2	Hafizullah	Junbish – Dostum	Junbish – Malik (Maymana)
24.5.1997	L-39C Albatros	Abdul Jamil	Junbish – Dostum	Junbish – Malik (Maymana)
24.5.1997	L-39C Albatros	Yousuf Shah	Junbish – Dostum	Taliban (Kabul)
24.5.1997	Mil Mi-17	Gulam Sakhi and Nur Ahmad	Junbish – Dostum	Taliban (Kabul)
7.6.1997	Mil Mi-17 (353)	Abdul Sabur	Jamiat – Massoud	Taliban (Kabul)
8.7.1997	Sukhoi Su-22M4 (probably 827)	Naqibullah	Junbish – Malik	Taliban (Jalalabad)
September 1997	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Malik	Taliban (Herat)
September 1997	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Malik	Taliban (Herat)
September 1997	Fighter jet	Unknown	Junbish – Malik	Taliban (Shindand)
29.9.1998	Antonov An-32	Mohammad Khan	Jamiat or Junbish	Taliban (Kabul)
4.8.2000	<i>L-39C Albatros (239)</i>	<i>Abdul Halim</i>	<i>Taliban</i>	<i>Jamiat – Massoud (Kulob, Tajikistan)</i>

Appendix III: Aircraft Losses 1992 – 2001

The most common causes of losses after the 1992 mujahideen victory were probably abandonment, neglect or using aircraft as sources of spare parts to keep the rest of the fleet operational. However, the number of combat losses and crashes was still relatively high: the chart below – which certainly is by no means complete – contains over 80 aircraft destroyed over the period from April 1992 to the end of 2001, listing known losses of individual aircraft that were shot down in air combat, fell victim to anti-aircraft fire, or crashed while performing military duties. It does not contain aircraft lost by abandonment, aircraft cannibalised for spare parts, or destroyed on the ground. The chart also does not contain losses in the period of 1989 to April 1992. The reason for all these ‘omissions’ is simple: such cases have been extremely poorly documented.

Types of aircraft are stated as reported in original sources which – given the often poor ability of locals or some journalists to differentiate between aircraft types – means that, for example, a ‘Su-17’ could in reality be everything from Su-17M2 to Su-22M4 or even a MiG-21 or simply a ‘fighter jet’. The reason is that only a fraction of losses were confirmed or commented on by aviation- or at least military-related officials. Photographic evidence is almost non-existent.

Unconfirmed losses are in italics.

Date	Place	Type	Cause of loss	Losing side	Winning side
21.6.1992	Kabul	An-12	Crash to the ground	Junbish	-
10.8.1992	Chahar Asiab	Su-17	AA fire	Probably Junbish	Hezb-e Islami
10.8.1992	Chahar Asiab	MiG-21	AA fire	Probably Junbish	Hezb-e Islami
14.8.1992	Kabul	Fighter jet	AA fire	Probably Junbish	Hezb-e Islami
3.9.1992	Province of Badakhshan	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Jamiat – Massoud	-
8.9.1992	Mazar-e Sharif	MiG-21	Crash to the ground	Junbish	-
16.2.1993	Termez, Uzbekistan	An-12	Belly landing	Junbish	-
17.3.1993	Near Fayzabad	Transport helicopter, probably Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Jamiat – Massoud	-
April 1993	Kayan Valley	Mi-8	Crash to the ground	Naderi	-
27.4.1993	Near Tashkurgan	An-32	Crash to the ground	Junbish	-
October 1993	Turkmenistan	Aircraft	AA fire	Unknown	Unknown

Date	Place	Type	Cause of loss	Losing side	Winning side
5.1.1994	Province of Balkh	Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Junbish	-
12.1.1994	Kabul	MiG-21	AA fire	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
12.1.1994	Kabul	Su-22	Air combat	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
30.1.1994	Charikar	Fighter jet	SA-3	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
30.1.1994	Province of Baghlan	Su-22	Air combat	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
28.2.1994	Afghanistan	Su-22	Air combat	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
19.3.1994	Western Afghanistan	MiG-21	Air combat	Junbish	Jamiat – Khan
22.3.1994	Province of Balkh	Fighter jet	Air combat	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
28.6.1994	Province of Balkh	Fighter jet	AA fire	Junbish	Jamiat – unknown commander
29.6.1994	Province of Logar	An-32	Crash to the ground	Junbish	-
3.7.1994	Province of Logar	An-24	Crash to the ground	Junbish	-
6.7.1994	Near Herat	Su-22	AA fire	Junbish	Jamiat – Khan
18.7.1994	Mazar-e Sharif	Aircraft	Aerial attack	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
August 1994	Pul-e Khumri	Mi-8	AA fire	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
August 1994	Pul-e Khumri	Mi-8	AA fire	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
4.10.1994	Province of Kunduz	Su-22	AA fire	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
26.1.1995	Tajikistan	Su-22	Crash to the ground	Junbish	-
15.2.1995	Khost-o-Fereng, province of Baghlan	Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Jamiat – Massoud	-
7.3.1995	Near Delaram	Fighter jet	AA fire	Jamiat – Massoud or Jamiat – Khan	Taliban
21.3.1995	Near Kabul	Fighter jet	AA fire	Jamiat – Massoud	Taliban
25.4.1995	Near Kabul	Fighter jet	MANPADS	Jamiat – Massoud	Taliban
May 1995	Near Shindand	Fighter jet	AA fire	Jamiat – Khan	Taliban
7.5.1995	Near Kabul	Mi-8 or Mi-17	AA fire	Jamiat – Massoud	Taliban
7.6.1995	North of Kabul	Su-22	Air combat	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
15.6.1995	Afghanistan	Mi-8 or 17	Air combat	Jamiat – Massoud	Taliban
15.6.1995	Afghanistan	Mi-8 or 17	Air combat	Jamiat – Massoud	Taliban
August 1995	Near Sarobi	Fighter jet	AA fire	Jamiat – Massoud	Hezb-e Islami
9.9.1995	Near Koshinda, province of Samangan	Fighter jet	AA fire	Junbish	Probably Jamiat – Massoud
16.10.1995	Near Maidan Shahr	MiG-21	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
16.10.1995	Near Maidan Shahr	MiG-21	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
16.10.1995	Near Maidan Shahr	MiG-21	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
16.10.1995	Near Maidan Shahr	Mi-8	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud

Date	Place	Type	Cause of loss	Losing side	Winning side
31.10.1995	Near Kabul	MiG-21	AA fire	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
1.11.1995	Province of Samangan	Su-22	AA fire	Junbish	Jamiat – Massoud
12.11.1995	Province of Ghazni	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Unknown	Taliban	Unknown
12.11.1995	Province of Ghazni	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Unknown	Taliban	Unknown
23.11.1995	Province of Balkh	Mi-17	Unknown	Allegedly Jamiat – Massoud	Unknown
22.12.1995	Near Kolangar, south of Kabul	Fighter jet	Unknown	Jamiat – Massoud	Unknown
1995	Afghanistan	Su-17	Air combat	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
11.2.1996	Province of Zabul	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Taliban	-
31.10.1996	Kabul	Su-22	AA fire	Junbish	Taliban
1.11.1996	Province of Faryab	Mi-8	Unknown	Junbish	Taliban
15.11.1996	Province of Laghman	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Taliban	-
22.11.1996	Province of Badghis	Fighter jet	Air combat	Junbish	Taliban
17.1.1997	Near Charikar	Su-22	AA fire	Junbish	Taliban
22.1.1997	Probably north of Kabul	MiG-21	AA fire	Junbish	Taliban
12.3.1997	Province of Badghis	Su-22	Air combat	Junbish	Taliban
27.5.1997	Province of Balkh	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Junbish	-
21.8.1997	Bamiyan	An-32	Crash to the ground	Jamiat – Massoud	-
October 1997	Kandahar	MiG-21	Crash to the ground	Taliban	-
13.1.1998	Near Quetta, Pakistan	An-12	Crash to the ground	Taliban	-
13.7.1998	Province of Samangan	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
2.8.1998	Near Kunduz	An-32	Crash to the ground	Taliban	-
6.8.1998	Province of Badakhshan	Su-22	AA fire	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
11.8.1999	Kandahar	Transport plane	Crash to the ground	Taliban	-
1.12.1998	Darzab, province of Jowzjan	Mi-8 or Mi-17	AA fire	Taliban	One of United Front parties
December 1998	Province of Faryab	Su-22	AA fire	Taliban	One of United Front parties
May 1999	Province of Bamiyan	Transport plane	AA fire	Taliban	One of United Front parties

Date	Place	Type	Cause of loss	Losing side	Winning side
July 1999	Province of Samangan	Mi-8 or Mi-17	AA fire	Taliban	One of United Front parties
September 1999	Taloqan	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Aerial attack	Jamiat – Massoud	Taliban
5.9.1999	Province of Kapisa	Mi-8 or Mi-17	AA fire	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
11.9.1999	Between Kabul and Kandahar	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Taliban	-
15.9.1999	Kandahar	Mi-8 or Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Taliban	-
6.10.1999	Dasht-e Qala, province of Takhar	Su-22	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
April 2000	Afghanistan	Aircraft	Crash to the ground	Taliban	-
April 2000	Province of Takhar	Probably Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Probably Jamiat – Massoud	-
6.8.2000	Province of Takhar	MiG-21	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
Summer 2000	Province of Takhar	Fighter jet	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
Summer 2000	Province of Takhar	Fighter jet	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
Summer 2000	Province of Takhar	Fighter jet	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
Summer 2000	Province of Takhar	Fighter jet	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
Summer 2000	Province of Takhar	Fighter jet	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
Summer 2000	Province of Takhar	Fighter jet	MANPADS	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
21.1.2001	Province of Parwan	MiG-21	AA fire	Taliban	Jamiat – Massoud
11.12.2001	Province of Takhar	Mi-17	Crash to the ground	Jamiat – Massoud	-

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Notes

Chapter 1

- 1 Alexander, 'The Raid that 'Ended a War': The RAF in the Third Afghan War, 1919'
- 2 Bergen, p.41 & Commins p.174
- 3 Andersson, 'The First 30 Years of Aviation in Afghanistan. Part 1'. This article contains extensive information on the beginnings of military aviation in Afghanistan and offers details of early Afghan aircraft markings.

Chapter 2

- 1 Maley, p.171
- 2 Giustozzi, *The Army of Afghanistan* (henceforth 'Army'), p.104
- 3 Marion, p.53
- 4 This overview is based upon information from several sources that differ in some details; it is also possible that from 1989 to 1992 additional AAF units were created. For example, the 382nd Regiment with An-12s could have been established only after 1988. For more information on AAF units and their bases, see Urban, pp. 225–226, Cooper, *Afghanistan, 1979-2001; Part 2*, 'Afghan Air Force in the late seventies before the Soviet invasion', 'Afghan pilot training at Mazar-e Shari airport in the late seventies', 'The history of the Su-7 Fitter in Afghanistan' and 'Джелалабад-89'.
- 5 Amongst Soviet-made bombs identified as operated by the AAF were foremost lighter and older types, like FAB-100M-46s and FAB-250M46s, and slightly more modern FAB-100s, FAB-250M-54s, FAB-250TS, and FAB-500M-54s. Relatively few of the more modern FAB-250M-62 and FAB-500M-62 were sighted over time, and primarily deployed by Su-17/22s. CBUs were almost exclusively from the RBK-250 and RBK-250PTAB-2,5M series; very few from the RBK-500AO-2.5RT: both types were filled with anti-personnel bomblets. As well as older, 57mm S-5K rockets fired from UB-16-57 and UB-32-57 pods, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the AAF also received some of the more advanced, 80mm S-8 rockets and related B-8M pods.
- 6 'The History of the Su-7 Fitter in Afghanistan'
- 7 Giustozzi, *Army*, p.79
- 8 Giustozzi, *Army*, p.78
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Марковский, 'Ан-12 в Афганистане'
- 11 Oliker, p.48
- 12 Giustozzi, *Army*, p.68
- 13 Ibid., p.69
- 14 Sands and Qazizai, p.157
- 15 Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud* (henceforth 'Empires'), p.58
- 16 Giustozzi, *Empires*, p.54
- 17 Stenersen, 'Mujahidin vs. Communists: Revisiting the battles of Jalalabad and Khost', p.2
- 18 John F. Burns, 'Afghanistan Says Airport Is Reopened as Battle for Eastern City Continues', *The New York Times*, 11 March 1989
- 19 'Джелалабад-89'
- 20 Marshall, p.7
- 21 'Джелалабад-89'
- 22 Rubin, p.155
- 23 Adkin and Yousaf, p.228
- 24 John F. Burns, 'Kabul Journal: In Power Still, Afghan Can Thank His 4-Star Aide', *The New York Times*, 10 May 1990
- 25 Марковский, 'Ан-12 в Афганистане'
- 26 Rubin, p.151
- 27 Marshall, p.8
- 28 Maley, 'The Afghanistan Wars', p.187

- 29 Rob Schultheis, 'In Afghanistan, Peace Must Wait', *The New York Times*, 29 December 1991
- 30 Younas, 'The Khost Operations'
- 31 Rob Schultheis, 'In Afghanistan, Peace Must Wait', *The New York Times*, 29 December 1991
- 32 Giustozzi, *Empires*, p.211. The real reason for ending the offensive might have been a secret agreement between the Jamiat-e Islami party and General Delawar who would later serve for the Jamiat-e Islami-dominated government.
- 33 Rubin, p.264
- 34 Giustozzi, 'The ethnicisation of an Afghan faction', p.1
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Giustozzi, 'War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan: 1978-1992', p.235
- 37 Марковский, 'Ан-12 в Афганистане'
- 38 Corwin, p.93

Chapter 3

- 1 Giustozzi, *Army*, p.114
- 2 In sources available to the author, it is not clearly stated if Haji Ahmad was a Jebh-e Nejat-e Melli party follower, but this is highly likely. Haji Ahmad's father held a position as an important commander of that party in the Kandahar area and his son probably followed in his steps.
- 3 Marion, 'Flight Risk', p.65. Apparently, Dawran was for a short time preceded by Col. Mir Anjamuddin.
- 4 Riedel, p.7 and other sources. Various articles and books state that initially Dostum had about 60 aircraft at his disposal but the original source from which the others took this information remains unknown to the author.
- 5 Rubin, p.277
- 6 Giustozzi, *Empires*, p.70
- 7 Ibid, p.70
- 8 For example, video footage exists of a Mi-24 flying over Jalalabad during celebrations of the mujahideen victory in 1993. It is not known, however, if the helicopter belonged to the Eastern Shura or was provided by the Rabbani government just for this occasion.
- 9 'Blood-Stained Hands. Past Atrocities in Kabul and Afghanistan's Legacy of Impunity', p.22
- 10 Giustozzi, 'The ethnicisation of an Afghan faction', p.1
- 11 Бысенков, 'Миссия в горящем Кабуле'
- 12 Марковский, 'Ан-12 в Афганистане'
- 13 'Heavy death toll in Herat fighting', *The Frontier Post*, 6 October 1992
- 14 'Scud site in Kabul destroyed', *The Dawn*, 13 October 1992
- 15 'No Fighting Seen Near Afghan Copter Crash', *The New York Times*, 18 April 1993
- 16 Zaeef, p.XXI. In the Pashtun south and south-east, former government assets, including not only military hardware but also public property of all kinds (for example desks at schools) were sold or distributed as war booty among different tribal alliances. In Kandahar, some of the tanks of the 2nd Corps were sold by Mulla Naqibullah Akhund to Ahmad Shah Massoud forces in Kabul. How the tanks actually got from the south to the area around the capital is unknown but money probably played a crucial role in arranging their transport through various commanders' fiefdoms.
- 17 'Most aircraft at Shindand base destroyed', *The Nation*, 16 October 1992
- 18 Giustozzi, 'Empires of Mud', p.167
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Maley, 'The Afghanistan Wars', p.203
- 21 Giustozzi, *Empires*, p.161
- 22 Available sources differ on the date of Momin's death. Some state that the fatal helicopter crash occurred on 4 January.

- 23 Giustozzi, *Empires*, p.163
 24 Giustozzi, *Empires*, p.161
 25 'Тражданскайя война в Афганистане'
 26 Ibid.
 27 Adamec, p.LXXII
 28 John-Thor Dahlburg, 'Afghan President Forces Foe from Capital : Civil war: Two days of fierce fighting may have broken a lethal, 6-month-old stalemate in Kabul', *The Los Angeles Times*, 27 June 1994
 29 Ibid.
 30 'Тражданскайя война в Афганистане'
 31 Marion, 'Flight Risk', p.70
 32 Maley, 'The Afghanistan Wars', p.219
 33 Anthony Davis, 'How the Taliban became a military force', in Maley, W. (ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn?: Afghanistan and the Taliban* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p.49. Davis' chapter in Maley's book is probably the most thorough description of the Taliban military in 1994-95.
 34 Rashid, p.29
 35 Davis, 'How the Taliban became a military force', p.50
 36 Давыдов, p.46
 37 Davis, 'How the Taliban became a military force', p.48
 38 Moshref, p.6
 39 Christia, p.68
 40 Brody, 'Revisiting Afghanistan: A Conversation with Najibullah'
 41 Giustozzi, *Army*, pp.117-119
 42 Sands and Qazizai, p.358
 43 Davis, 'How the Taliban became a military force', p.56
 44 Ibid., p.57
 45 Ibid., p.58
 46 Ibid., p.59
 47 Ibid.
 48 Ibid., p.60
 49 Ibid.
 50 Ibid., p.62 & Gutman, p.73
 51 Peter Deneufville, 'Taliban bombing of Kabul escalates war', *UPI*, 22 October 1995
 52 'News Summary on Afghanistan 1995', p.19
 53 Cooper, 'Afghanistan, 1979-2001; Part 2' (based on various volumes of *Österreichische Militärzeitschrift*, 1992-1996). The actual number of Taliban jets shot down over Maidan Shahr in that time period is impossible to verify.
 54 Sami Yousafzai, 'Up Close With the Taliban's Next King', *The Daily Beast*, 31 July 2015
 55 Davis, 'How the Taliban became a military force', p.60
 56 'News summary on Afghanistan 1995'
 57 Peters, p.90
- 12 'Crisis Of Impunity – Foreign Assistance To The United Front'
 13 Wörmer, p.23
 14 Ibid., p.24
 15 Bruce Pannier and Yakub Turan, 'Afghanistan: Fighting Intensifies In Northern City', *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, 19 September 1997
 16 Williams, 'The Last Warlord', p.193
 17 Emadi, p.48
 18 'The Taleban reportedly rejected a UN request to stop bombing an air strip', *Voice of America*, 1 January 1998
 19 Rahimullah Yusufzai, 'Taliban capture strategic Taloqan', *The News*, 12 August 1998
 20 In *The Last Warlord*, Williams offers a different narrative: according to him, Dostum withdrew from Jowzjan to Samangan province and in early September 1998 to Bamiyan from where he evacuated by aircraft to Iran hours before the Taliban reached the city.
 21 Douglas Jehl, 'Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats' Deaths', *The New York Times*, 11 September 1998
 22 Cooper, 'Afghanistan, 1979-2001; Part 2'
 23 Luke Hunt, 'Advancing Taliban could take Shia city at weekend', *The Irish Times*, 12 September 1998
 24 'Afghanistan: Massacres of Hazaras – Background'

Chapter 5

- 1 Coll, 'Ghost Wars', p.434
 2 Marion, 'Flight Risk', p.83
 3 Piotr Balczerowicz, personal communication, 27 April 2020.
 4 'News Summary on Afghanistan 1999'
 5 Stenersen, p.135
 6 'Taliban, Opposition In Rocket Exchange Near Kabul', *Reuters*, 6 August 1999
 7 Richard Galpin, 'Key air base falls in Taliban push', *The Guardian*, 2 August 1999
 8 Richard Galpin, 'Taliban fighters beaten back but enemies fear new offensive', *The Guardian*, 6 August 1999
 9 Debay and Donald, p.42
 10 'Heavy fighting erupts in Afghanistan', *IOL*, 5 September 1999
 11 Giustozzi, *Empires*, pp.82-83
 12 Brown and Farah, p.75
 13 Peter Landesman, 'Arms and the man', *The New York Times*, 17 August 2003
 14 Brown and Farah, p.75
 15 Ibid., p.51
 16 Ibid., p.185
 17 Ibid., p.191
 18 Ibid., p.182
 19 Peters, p.90
 20 Marion, 'Flight Risk', p.82
 21 Giustozzi, *Army*, p.118
 22 Marion, 'The Destruction and Rebuilding of the Afghan Air force, 1989-2009', p.27
 23 Марковский, 'Ан-12 в Афганистане'
 24 Giustozzi, *Army*, pp.118-119
 25 Jianwei and Boon, p.365
 26 This is a speculation based on known technical details of the Stinger and SA-7 MANPADS; some kind of upgrading of their batteries so that they could be kept operational cannot be absolutely ruled out. For example in 1999, the Taliban presented their Stingers to the media, which, however, does not mean that the missiles were in working condition.
 27 Sami Yousafzai, 'New leader "a modern face among the Taliban"?', *CBS News*, 10 September 2015

- 28 Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman, 'Osama used Bamiyan Buddhas for shooting practice', *The News*, 21 October 2006
- 29 'Crisis Of Impunity – Foreign Assistance To The United Front'. While available sources agree that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Rabbani government was short of cash, they differ about the available financial resources the government had in the period of 1992-96. For example, Giustozzi in his book *Empires of Mud* argues that it had very little money available from the very start of its functioning.
- 30 Marion, 'Flight Risk', p.79
- 31 Sandeep Unnithan, 'How a Soviet-era helicopter gunship became a South Asian must-have. India and Sri Lanka have them. Pakistan is buying them. Afghanistan is getting some more?' *Daily O*, 12 November 2015
- 32 Piotr Balczerowicz, personal communication, 27 April 2020.
- 33 Praveen Swami, 'Making the water boil in Afghanistan', *The Hindu*, 9 July 2008
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